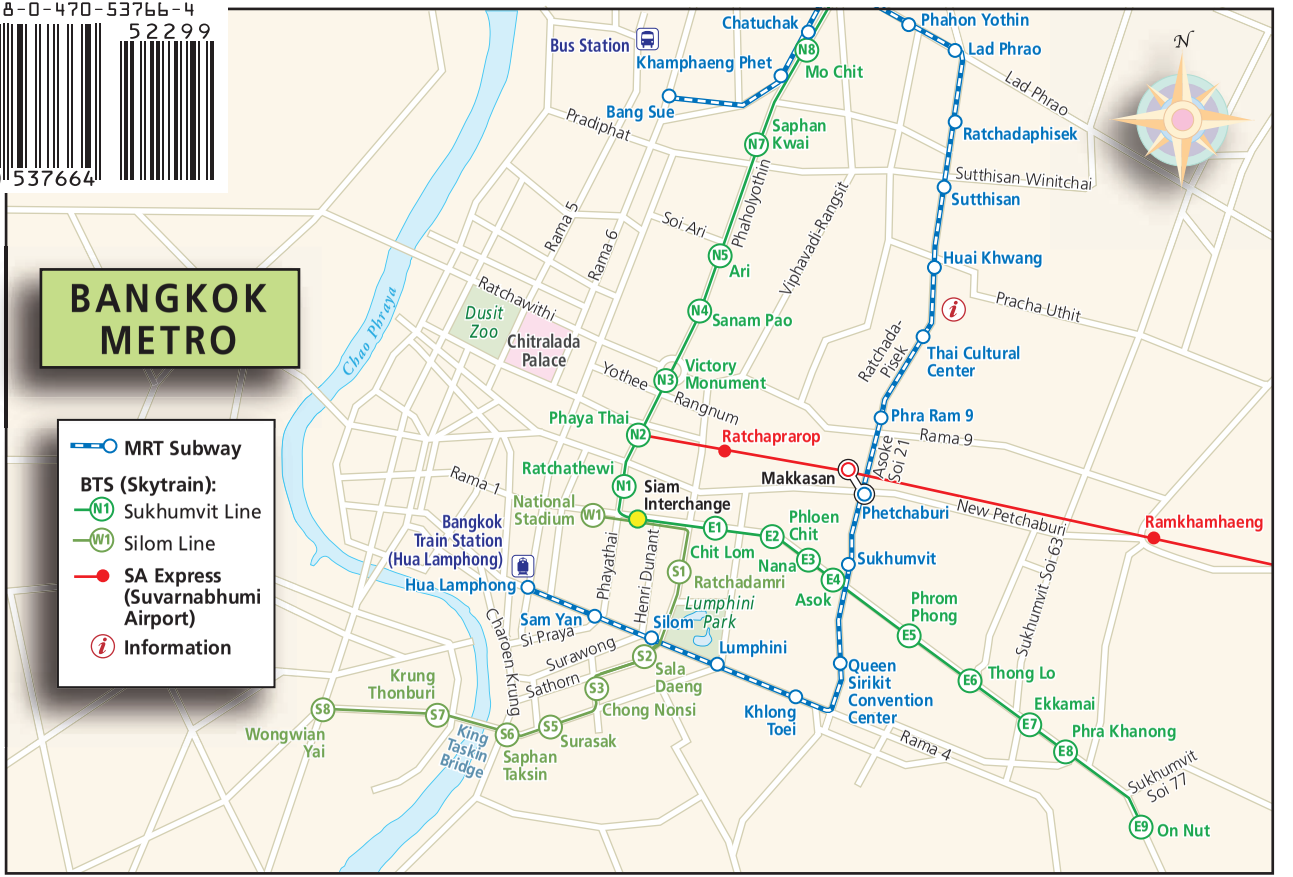
Frommer's

Thailand

VISIT…

ISBN 978-0-470-53766-4
52299
9 780470 537664



Frommer's®

Thailand

9th Edition

by Ron Emmons

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Emmons taught English in Africa and the Americas before moving to Thailand, where he now works as a freelance writer/photographer. He is the author and photographer of *Portrait of Thailand* and *Walks Along the Thames Path* (New Holland, U.K.), as well as the writer of *Top Ten Bangkok* (Dorling Kindersley, U.K.) and *Spiral Guide to the Dominican Republic* (Automobile Association, U.K.). Ron has also made major contributions to several other guidebooks, such as the *Rough Guide to Vietnam* and *National Geographic Traveler Vietnam.*

Published by:

WILEY PUBLISHING, INC.

111 River St.
Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774

Copyright © 2010 Wiley Publishing, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978/750-8400, fax 978/646-8600. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201/748-6011, fax 201/748-6008, or online at http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Wiley and the Wiley Publishing logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates. Frommer's is a trademark or registered trademark of Arthur Frommer. Used under license. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. Wiley Publishing, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

ISBN 978-0-470-53766-4
Editor: Jennifer Reilly
Production Editor: Eric T. Schroeder
Cartographer: Roberta Stockwell
Photo Editor: Richard Fox
Production by Wiley Indianapolis Composition Services

Front cover photo: Monks lighting *khom loy* candles and lanterns for the Loi Krathong festival. ©Alison Wright / DanitaDelimont.com
Back cover photo: Tourists riding elephants on jungle tour, Chiang Mai. ©Deco / Alamy Images

For information on our other products and services or to obtain technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877/762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317/572-3993 or fax 317/572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats.

Manufactured in the United States of America

5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS vii

1 THE BEST OF THAILAND 1

1 The Best Cultural Experiences 1
2 The Best Luxury Resorts & Spas 3
3 The Best Mid- & High-End Resorts 4
4 The Best Luxury Hotels 5
5 The Best Hotels with Character 5
6 The Best Fine Dining 6
7 The Best Small Restaurants 7
8 The Best Party Beaches 8
9 The Best Outdoor Adventures 8
10 The Best of Natural Thailand 9
11 The Best Cultural Vacation Activities 10
12 The Best Shopping 10
13 The Best Archaeological Sights & Museums 11
14 The Best Small Towns 11
15 The Most Fascinating Temples 12

2 THAILAND IN DEPTH 13

1 Thailand Today 13
2 Looking Back at Thailand 15
3 Religion in Thailand 22
Thai Etiquette 24
4 Thailand's Art & Architecture 24
5 The Lay of the Land 27
6 Thailand in Popular Culture 28
7 Eating & Drinking in Thailand 29
Overcoming a Fear of Food Stalls . . . 31
8 Tips on Shopping 33
Shopping Scams 33

3 PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO THAILAND 34

1 When to Go 34
Thailand Calendar of Events 36
2 Entry Requirements 37
3 Getting There & Getting Around 37
4 Money & Costs 41
What Things Cost in Bangkok 42
5 Health 43
6 Safety 46
Sex for Sale 48
7 Specialized Travel Resources 49
8 Sustainable Tourism 51

General Resources for Green Travel 52
9 Special-Interest Trips & Escorted General-Interest Tours 53
10 Staying Connected 57
Online Traveler's Toolbox 58
11 Tips on Accommodations 59

IES IN THAILAND **61**

1 The Regions in Brief 62
2 3 Days in Bangkok 64
3 1-Week Ancient Capitals Tour 66
4 1-Week Island-Hopping Tour 68
5 1-Week Northern Adventure Tour 70

5 INTRODUCING BANGKOK **72**

1 Orientation 72
Neighborhoods in Brief 78
2 Getting Around 79
Fast Facts: Bangkok 83

6 WHERE TO STAY & DINE IN BANGKOK **87**

1 Where to Stay 87
2 Where to Dine 105
Tips on Dining: Bangkok Cheap Eats 110

7 WHAT TO SEE & DO IN BANGKOK **120**

1 Bangkok's Waterways 120
2 Bangkok's Top Historical Treasures & Wats 124
3 Other Important Wats 130
4 Cultural & Wellness Pursuits 133
5 Staying Active 135
6 Shopping 137
7 Bangkok After Dark 142
8 Side Trips from Bangkok 146

8 THE EASTERN SEABOARD **151**

1 Pattaya 151
2 Ban Phe & Ko Samet 162
3 Chanthaburi Province 165
4 Trat & Ko Chang 166

9 SOUTHERN PENINSULA: THE EAST COAST & ISLANDS **173**

1 Hua Hin/Cha-Am 173
2 Chumphon 184
3 Surat Thani 186
4 Ko Samui 191
5 Ko Pha Ngan 212
6 Ko Tao 218
7 The Far South & on to Malaysia ... 221

10 SOUTHERN PENINSULA: THE WEST COAST & ISLANDS 224

1 Getting to Know Phuket 226
Fast Facts: Phuket 232
2 Where to Stay in Phuket 233
3 Where to Dine in Phuket 246
4 Exploring Phuket 251
5 Side Trips from Phuket: Khao Lak & Offshore Islands 258
6 Krabi (Ao Nang, Railay & Khlong Muang Beaches) 262
7 Ko Phi Phi 268
8 Ko Lanta 271
9 Trang 273

11 CENTRAL THAILAND 275

1 Ayutthaya 275
2 Lopburi 283
3 Phitsanulok 284
4 Sukhothai & Si Satchanalai Historical Parks 288
5 Tak Province: Mae Sot & the Myanmar (Burma) Border ... 293

12 EXPLORING NORTHERN THAILAND 298

1 The Land & Its People 298
2 When to Go 302
Northern Thailand Calendar of Events 302
3 Getting There & Getting Around 304
4 Tours & Trekking in the Far North 305
Tips on Jungle Trekking 306

13 CHIANG MAI 309

1 Orientation 309
Fast Facts: Chiang Mai 312
2 Where to Stay 313
3 Where to Dine 321
4 Seeing the Sights 327
5 Chiang Mai Activities 332
6 Shopping 335
7 Chiang Mai After Dark 338
8 Side Trips from Chiang Mai 339

14 TOURING THE NORTHERN HILLS 344

1 The Mae Hong Son Loop 344
2 Chiang Rai 357
3 Chiang Saen & the Golden Triangle 364
Onward to Laos 369

15 EXPLORING ISAN: THAILAND'S FRONTIER 370

1 Information & Tours 370
2 Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) 371
3 Khon Kaen 372
4 Udon Thani & Ban Chiang 373
5 Loei 375
6 Along the Mekong from Loei to Nong Khai 375
7 Nong Khai 376
Goodness Gracious! Great Balls of . . . Fire? 377
8 Nakhon Phanom 377
9 Surin 378
Ubon Ratchathani 379

16 FAST FACTS 381

1 Fast Facts: Thailand 381
2 Airline, Hotel & Car-Rental Websites 385

17 A LITTLE BIT OF THAI TO HELP YOU GET BY 387

1 Basic Phrases & Vocabulary 387
2 Getting Around 388
3 In a Restaurant 388
4 Specific Menu Terms 389
5 Geographic Terms 390
6 Day of the Week & Time 390
7 Shopping 390
8 Numbers 391

INDEX 392

General Index 392
Accommodations Index 402
Restaurant Index 405

LIST OF MAPS

Thailand 63
Thailand Itineraries 67
Bangkok at a Glance 74
Where to Stay in Bangkok 88
Sukhumvit Road 97
Where to Dine in Bangkok 106
Bangkok Attractions 122
The Grand Palace & Wat Phra Kaew 125
The Eastern Seaboard 153
Pattaya 155
Ko Chang 167
The Southern Peninsula: East Coast 175
Surat Thani 187
Ko Samui 193
The Southern Peninsula: West Coast 225
Phuket & Ko Phi Phi 227
The Central Plains 277
Ayutthaya 279
Northern Thailand 299
Where to Stay in Chiang Mai 315
Where to Dine in Chiang Mai 323
Chiang Mai Attractions 329
Touring the Northern Hills 345
The Mae Hong Son Loop 346
Mae Hong Son 353
Chiang Rai 359
Isan 371

HOW TO CONTACT US

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

Frommer's Thailand, 9th Edition
Wiley Publishing, Inc. • 111 River St. • Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774

AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

FROMMER'S STAR RATINGS, ICONS & ABBREVIATIONS

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system.** In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **eight feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

Finds	Special finds—those places only insiders know about
Fun Facts	Fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
Kids	Best bets for kids, and advice for the whole family
Moments	Special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
Overrated	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
Tips	Insider tips—great ways to save time and money
Value	Great values—where to get the best deals
Warning!	Warning—traveler's advisories are usually in effect

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE American Express
DC Diners Club
DISC Discover
MC MasterCard
V Visa

TRAVEL RESOURCES AT FROMMERS.COM

Frommer's travel resources don't end with this guide. **Frommers.com** has travel information on more than 4,000 destinations. We update features regularly, giving you access to the most current trip-planning information and the best airfare, lodging, and car-rental bargains. You can also listen to podcasts, connect with other Frommers.com members through our active-reader forums, share your travel photos, read blogs from guidebook editors and fellow travelers, and much more.

1 The Best of Thailand

Beaches, bargains, palaces, and stunning temples. Thailand has much to offer anyone, from the burned-out corporate executive in search of ultraluxurious respite to the intrepid backpacker hoping to explore beyond the beaten track. What brings visitors back here time and time again is undoubtedly the warmth of the Thai people, their laid-back attitude, the kingdom's at-times incomprehensible yet beguiling customs, feverish festivals, and amazing culinary adventures. For many, Thailand's most notable draws are its opulent royal palaces, ancient ruins, and ornate temples housing skillfully crafted figures of Buddha, a revered symbol that underscores a fervent and widespread devotion. In madcap Bangkok, you'll find an ultramodern cityscape muscling in on quiet canal and riverside communities. Mercantile hubs, such as historic Chinatown, consist of scores of labyrinthine alleys crammed with narrow shophouses, markets, and diners, all evoking a heady mix of sights, sounds, and smells. Beyond Bangkok, rice paddies carpet endless flat plains in a landscape dotted by tiny villages and mountains. White sandy beaches and acres of coconut palms and rubber plantations lace the southern and eastern gulf provinces. Wherever you go, expect contradictions and oxymorons: Witness all-permeating Buddhist pacifism coexisting with popular pugilism in Muay Thai boxing. Inscrutable Thailand will incessantly intrigue and confound the curious traveler.

There is also adventure of all kinds here: extreme sports on land and sea, trekking to hill-tribe villages, and abseiling down sheer limestone cliffs. The country's infrastructure allows travel by bus, train, car, boat, or even hot-air balloon, as well as via a network of budget airlines serving many regional cities. Gorgeous tropical islands play host to low-end guesthouses or stylish and contemporary five-star resorts. Regional cuisines differ greatly and offer a breadth of flavors in varying blends of sweet, sour, and salty variations—not always ignited by fiery spice. In this chapter, I list the best restaurants and hotels, as well as give hints on where to find what you're looking for in this dazzling kingdom.

1 THE BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

- **Celebrate Loy Krathong:** Late October or early November (depending on the moon) marks this delightful festival, when Thais congregate along the rivers to release handmade floats, or *krathongs,* symbolically casting away troubles. The small lotus-shaped *krathong* is made of a cross-section of banana stem decorated with garlands and topped by a candle. In Bangkok, over the Royal Palaces and the Chao Phraya River (near Saphan Taksin BTS), there are magnificent pyrotechnics. In the north, in Chiang Mai, hundreds gather by the Ping River and open spaces to launch *khom loy* (meter-high paper lanterns) into the heavens. As the night goes on, the sky above the city is filled with thousands of orange stars as these giant lanterns drift ever upward.
- **A Night at the Patravadi Theatre:** In the Bangkok suburb of Thonburi, the

doyenne of Bangkok's art and theater scene holds court in a funky little arts center by the river. Patravadi Mejudhon is the woman behind some of the most creative dance performances in Thailand. Her passion for perfection and her unremitting support for classical Thai and contemporary dance have brought this former film and theater star much praise. Her latest venture is **Studio 9** (p. 108), a riverside venue offering dinner-dance evenings, just opposite Patravadi Theatre. Studio 9 provides a platform for emerging talent and gives diners a heart-stopping display of undiscovered Thai talent of all ages and artistic genres. Call ahead for information and reservations (✆ **02412-7287**), or consult the useful site www.patravaditheatre.com.

- **Visit a Market:** Upcountry or downtown, Thailand's markets are always colorful and, depending on the prevailing heat or your levels of curiosity, are worthy of an early-morning meander. Visiting one is a great chance to see authentic Thai life firsthand. Everything is on sale, from fragrant flower garlands to tropical fruits to the fresh ocean catch of the day—all piled upon simple trestle tables. Meat or live poultry is also available straight from local farms, as are endless varieties of exotic spices, chilies, curry pastes, and freshly prepared treats. It's a serious, sensory experience, best undertaken as early as possible and on a light stomach. See chapters throughout this book.
- **Take a Ride Along the River:** Whether it's just for an hour, or on an overnight trip to Ayutthaya, traveling by boat along Thailand's Chao Phraya River is truly memorable. In Bangkok, you can choose from a cacophonous longtail boat, a small motor launch, or a restored rice barge to float upstream. Some hotels offer dinner shows on restored vessels or sunset cruises on a huge floating discotheque. At several points along the Chao Phraya River, you'll see the concrete jungle of urban Bangkok meet verdant mango and litchi orchards, and you'll see the city's historic quality truly reveal itself. You'll also pass by multicultural communities boasting 200-year-old Portuguese and French churches, Islamic mosques, and elaborate Chinese temples. The city's *klongs* (canals) are worth exploring at any time of day, but, at sunset, the gilded spires of the palaces and tall *prangs* (towers) of the city's temples are reminiscent of mythical castles. See chapter 7.
- **Observe Elephants:** The elephant is the symbol of the monarchy in Thailand and is highly respected for its intelligence, grace, and majesty. All elephants deemed "white" belong to the king; only after strict inspections—to check for albino pigmentation in the animal's ears, toenails, tongue, genitals, and tail—will an elephant be declared as such. A number of tourism-focused elephant camps have been created in and around Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Chiang Rai. Listed below are some camps respected for their humane environments. Near Lampang, at Tung Kwian, the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** (✆ **05424-7875**) educates and entertains visitors as well as rehabilitates sick or injured elephants. Luxury resorts, such as the **Four Seasons' Tented Camp** (✆ **05391-0200**) and the **Anantara Golden Triangle** (✆ **05378-4084**), both near Chiang Rai, have put together pachyderm-friendly activities for guests, including *mahout* (elephant handling) classes. See p. 342 and 368.
- **Discover Lanna Architecture:** The country's northern towns and cities embrace not just a different pace of life, but also a unique culture, language, and cuisine. Known as the Lanna kingdom ("Kingdom of a Million Rice Fields"), this area was home to five consecutive

Lanna periods that bloomed and ebbed from the 12th to the 16th century. Lanna influence can be seen among Chiang Mai's 121 *wats* (temples), the most stunning of which are **Wat Phra Singh** and **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** (the latter is near the summit of the city's guardian mountain). In tranquil Lampang, a wander around the atmospheric enclaves of **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang** will transport you centuries back in time. At Lamphun, the rare and delightful stupas of **Wat Chamadevi** (also known as Wat Kukut) show off the nation's earliest achievements—dating from 1218 and highlighting relics of the Hariphunchai (Mon) era. But these are just a brief introduction to the spectacular ancient temples of this area. See chapters 13 and 14 for more recommendations.

2 THE BEST LUXURY RESORTS & SPAS

- **Banyan Tree Phuket** (Phuket; ✆ **07632-4374**): It's chic, it's private, and it's (supposed to be) paparazzi-proof. Maybe that's why the likes of pop singer Kylie Minogue and British sports star David Beckham book the Banyan Tree. This self-contained resort boasts luxurious Thai-style villas and some of the island's best spa treatments; expect pools, palms, and lots of panache. Plus, this prestigious hotel chain prides itself on its environmental awareness schemes, which benefit different communities all over the region. It appeals to celebs and jet-setters with a conscience. See p. 243.
- **JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** (Phuket; ✆ **07633-8000**): This distinctive haven is set amid acres of spectacular gardens, featuring ponds, flowerbeds, and landscaped lawns leading to a glistening beach; though the strong riptides make ocean swimming unsafe, two stylish pools make up for this. Balconies offer expansive sea views and guests have endless dining options, from Italian to Japanese and traditional Thai—all top quality. The Mandara Spa, hidden behind giant ocher walls and copper doors, is reminiscent of a Marrakech palace. The hotel's environmental efforts mean that staff and keen guests are actively involved in turtle conservation groups such as Naucrates. See p. 245.
- **Rayavadee** (Krabi; ✆ **07562-0740**): Two-story cottages are scattered over this expansive coconut grove, facing two of Thailand's best white-sand beaches. Many villas have Jacuzzis or hammocks, with breezy views of some of the most magnificent cliffs in the country. The luxurious spa and the secluded location make it a dream hideaway. A trip to the nearby *hongs* (hidden lagoons) here is unforgettable. See p. 265.
- **Chiva-Som International Health Resort** (Hua Hin; ✆ **03253-6536**): Unashamedly sleek and swanky Thai-style accommodations, enhanced by personalized healthcare, make this wellness retreat a popular choice for visiting celebrities in need of a body-and-soul detox. Prices are some of the highest in the country, but the trade-offs are tangible. After you've experienced any of Chiva-Som's careful, healing therapies or invigorating health regimes, nowhere else will seem quite the same. See p. 178.
- **Six Senses Hideaway** (Ko Samui; ✆ **07632-4333**): Private villas hidden behind whitewashed adobe walls, gorgeous sunken poolside *salas,* (pavilions) and bright, modern living spaces make this resort a delight. Close enough to

the beach for walks, but far enough for tranquility, gourmets and gluttons will revel in the culinary experiences to be had here. The organically inspired mud-built spa has beehive-shaped treatment rooms that appear to float in a lily pad pond. It's run by the sultans of spa, Six Senses, who are renowned for their eco-sensitivity as much as their restorative treatments. See p. 200.

- **The Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** (Chiang Mai; ✆ **05388-8888**): This megaresort was designed to echo a sumptuous Lanna-era palace, with gardens, rice paddies, lawns, and a restored *viharn* (assembly hall). Many of the freestanding villas boast unique luxuries such as pianos, saunas, sun decks with Jacuzzis, and private massage tables. A number of the suites have plunge pools, and the spa is modeled after a stunning teak Burmese palace. There's mouthwatering cuisine on hand, too; but deep pockets are required for that, as well as the rooms. See p. 314.
- **Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle** (Chiang Saen; ✆ **05378-4084**): On the edge of the Burmese jungle, just meters from the Laos border and overlooking the swirling Mekong River, this resort's spectacular spa and fine restaurants are just some of this two-wing property's many pleasures. The landscape is artfully punctuated with a glassy infinity pool overlooking a towering bamboo grove. An amazing museum, dedicated to the history of opium, is just a short walk or bike ride away, as is the hotel's Elephant Camp, where you can sharpen your pachyderm-handling skills with a 2-ton inmate. See p. 368.

3 THE BEST MID- & HIGH-END RESORTS

- **Amari Emerald Cove Resort** (Ko Chang; ✆ **03955-2000**): This luxurious place, with a 50m (164-ft.) lap pool as well as children's pool and excellent beach location, makes an ideal spot for a relaxing getaway. It also has a spa, dive shop, fitness room, Wi-Fi access, and a choice of four restaurants. Yet the biggest surprise at this and many other Amari resorts are the affordable rates—there are frequent package offers that bring room rates down to around 50% of published rates. See p. 170.
- **The Sarojin** (Khao Lak; ✆ **07642-7901**): The Sarojin is a great escape from nearby Phuket. The superbly styled beach resort is scattered over 4 hectares (10 acres), with delightfully designed pool villas and outstanding suites, all minutes from a pristine beach. Guests can indulge in the outdoor spa and Thai cooking classes. See p. 259.
- **Lipa Lodge Resort** (Ko Samui; ✆ **07748-5616**): If you're looking for a relaxing break in a small, inexpensive resort without all the buzzers and bells, you couldn't do better than to head for Lipa Lodge, on Ko Samui's west coast. Well removed from the frantic nightlife of Chaweng Beach, this is the place to sit back and soak up some sunsets. Because it is run by a gifted chef, you can look forward to tasty meals, too. See p. 206.
- **Twin Palms Phuket** (Phuket; ✆ **07631-6500**): A stunning Sirin Beach property, the Twin Palms adheres to a clean, contemporary style. Bright guest rooms overlook a leafy garden and expansive lagoon pool; a local golf course is nearby. New residences opened in 2008, including a huge penthouse for the truly indulgent. Opportunities abound for culinary indulgences, and there's a wine list to write home about.

The health conscious can sign up for a breadth of treatments at the Palm Spa. See p. 242.

- **Pimalai Resort and Spa** (Ko Lanta; ✆ **07560-7999**): On a remote stretch of beach, on the quiet island of Ko Lanta Yai, this delightfully designed hillside resort blends easily with the island's unspoiled nature. Its sympathetic Thai architect has thoughtfully built the shady walkways around old trees. An immaculate indigo infinity pool, an excellent spa, and sumptuous villas put it on top of this island's A-list. Direct speedboat connections in dry season make it a perfect upmarket escape. See p. 272.

4 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

- **The Mandarin Oriental** (Bangkok; ✆ **02659-9000**): The Mandarin Oriental houses more celebrities per square inch than a tabloid magazine. The hotel's elegant colonial style has made it the paragon of luxury for more than 130 years. Today, two resort-style swimming pools with private *salas,* the refurbished Sala Rim Nam and Verandah restaurants, the remodeled China House, and a stylish Ayurvedic Penthouse, put the final touches on this Thai hallmark of impeccable hospitality. See p. 90.
- **The Peninsula, Bangkok** (Bangkok; ✆ **800/2828-3888** or 02861-2888): This is a shining example of modern high-rise luxury. Expect all the courtesy and efficiency of a Thai five-star hotel with no pretentiousness. Great dining in a delightfully relaxed atmosphere is accompanied by dazzling riverside views of Bangkok, made memorable by flawless service. Built in a 1900s-style colonial villa, the spa tops off the facilities of this superb hotel. See p. 90.
- **The Chedi** (Chiang Mai; ✆ **05325-3333**): The rare combination of colonial and minimalism works exceptionally well for this recent addition to the northern capital. Stark, contemporary rooms complement the historic two-story colonial villa that now houses the hotel's colorful restaurants and terrace, the latter of which offers a terrific high tea. Expect charming service and fantastic views of the river. See p. 314.

5 THE BEST HOTELS WITH CHARACTER

- **Ibrik Resort** (Bangkok; ✆ **02254-8500**): Tucked away in the arty quarter of Thonburi district near the historic Wat Rakhang, Ibrik's three airy rooms are decorated in a charming and vivid Thai palette. The vibe is intimate and homey, and the river-life views evoke peaceful contemplation. It's both beautiful and boutiquey. See p. 92.
- **The Eugenia** (Bangkok; ✆ **02259-9011-9**): This colonial-style boutique hotel is the place for a trip back in time. Period furnishings and ancient tomes in the library lend a sophisticated aura to the place, which is only enhanced by the innovative menu in the restaurant and friendly, professional service. See p. 98.
- **Sofitel Centara Grand Resort & Villas** (Hua Hin; ✆ **800/221-4542** or 03251-2021): This historic hotel's vibrant heritage comes alive through spacious rooms; long, cool corridors; and verdant, lush grounds. High tea in the Museum Tea Corner is a definite highlight. See p. 179.

- **The Rachamankha** (Chiang Mai; ✆ **05390-4111**): Quite possibly the most delicious bolt-hole in town, this monastic-style complex is a place where Lanna minimalism meets Thai sophistication. Showcasing the region's Lanna art and culture, the quirky property has wowed everyone with its monastic courtyards, velvet lawns, beautiful decor, and exceptionally well-stocked library. See p. 318.
- **Four Seasons Tented Camp** (Golden Triangle; ✆ **05391-0200**): Tents were never like this when I was a kid. They might be made of canvas, but those at the Four Seasons are huge, they are equipped with period furnishings, and they enjoy total privacy on a lush hillside. Such activities as elephant treks and boat trips, as well as gourmet dining and cocktail parties, are all part of the deal at this all-inclusive resort. See p. 368.
- **Fern Resort** (Mae Hong Son; ✆ **05368-0001**): You're well off the beaten path at Fern, amid a collection of petite mid-range bungalows, but the setting is lovely, and self-guided hikes are made all the more enjoyable by the resort's resident pets. See p. 354.

6 THE BEST FINE DINING

- **Breeze** (Bangkok; ✆ **02624-9999**): The skyscraping seafood experience on offer at Breeze will amaze anyone who braves the giddy heights of this alfresco restaurant in State Tower. The fusion-inspired menu is guaranteed to blow you (and your wallet) away, while the views of Bangkok below are irresistible. Advance reservations are obligatory. See p. 109.
- **Baan Khanitha** (Bangkok; ✆ **02675-4200** and 02258-4128): Authentic Thai cuisine, served up in a cozy and refined ambience, attracts Thai and foreign gourmets alike to sample the extensive menu. Choose from two locations: the original, on Sukhumvit Soi 23, and the other, on South Sathorn Road. See p. 114.
- **Pier 59** (Bangkok; ✆ **02679-1200**): High above the glistening city, this new supper-only venue houses vast aquariums and low blue lighting, creating an ambient glow. Seafood is the focus, but carnivores should fear not; the exceptionally long menu includes meat as well as delectable crustaceans. The miniature selection of bite-size desserts is sure to delight all. See p. 113.
- **Biscotti** (Bangkok; ✆ **02126-8866**): Few Italian restaurants impress like this Four Seasons favorite. A wonderful open-concept kitchen is surrounded by a fusion of East and West designer decor by New York–style guru Tony Chi. Expect a twist on the traditional, accompanied by an excellent wine list. See p. 114.
- **The Pier** (Ko Samui; ✆ **07743-0681**): This sophisticated and romantic spot on the north coast of Ko Samui is the ideal place to indulge in some delectable seafood and a glass of wine while listening to hip sounds and gazing at the stars. See p. 207.
- **The Boathouse Wine & Grill** (Kata Beach, Phuket; ✆ **07633-0015**): With a delightful terrace looking over Kata Beach, the Boathouse is the ideal spot to enjoy fine dining beside the sea. The best of French and Thai cuisine is on offer, as is a dizzying range of wines from the cellar. See p. 247.
- **Fujian** (Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, Chiang Mai; ✆ **05388-8888**): It's hard to choose a more upmarket eatery in Chiang Mai. Just before the main gate to this fanciful Lanna-era-styled

resort is the hotel's Chinese restaurant, set in a pseudo-colonial mansion at the end of a pretty cobbled lane. Succulent dim sum lunches, or mouthwatering marinated meats, filets of waxy steamed fish, and fresh seafood complemented by devilish desserts (***warning:*** the black sesame ice cream is addictive) make for a rather pricey, but exquisite, dining experience. See p. 322.

7 THE BEST SMALL RESTAURANTS

- **Le Bouchon** (Bangkok; ✆ **02234-9109**): A truly precious gem among the rabble, this authentic French bistro is embedded in the thick of seamy Patpong. Fine French food and endless top-notch vintages are worth the intrepid voyage into the depths of this saucy *soi.* See p. 112.
- **Taling Pling** (Bangkok; ✆ **02236-4830**): This rustic-styled lunch and supper spot gets filled to bursting at lunchtime with locals craving both its authentic Thai dishes and carb-packed Western desserts. Foreigners are mercifully provided with a photographic catalog of the Thai menu; just point and eat. See p. 113.
- **Crystal Jade** (Bangkok; ✆ **02129-4343**): Don't be put off by its clean and sparkly department store location; this tiny Chinese eatery is part of a chain with a huge and loyal fan base. A hearty meal of *xiao long bao* (dumpling soup) or authentic steamy noodles costs a few dollars and is absolutely authentic. See p. 115.
- **Itsara** (Hua Hin; ✆ **03253-0574**): Set in a 1920s-inspired seaside villa, this Thai and seafood restaurant is a local favorite that incessantly pulls in crowds who come to savor its simple but elegant locale and cuisine. See p. 181.
- **Betelnut** (Ko Samui; ✆ **07723-0222**): This is the perfect place to end a day of sprawling on Samui's soft-sand beaches. Exciting fusion fare blends Thai, Japanese, French, and other influences into unique dishes that linger long on the palate. See p. 206.
- **Ka Jok See** (Phuket Town; ✆ **07621-7903**): Eating at this unassuming restaurant is like visiting a friend with great culinary and social skills. First you choose your main course, which is served with a free starter and dessert, and then, after dinner, get ready to jive around the tables with staff and other customers. See p. 250.
- **Baan Rim Pa** (Patong, Phuket; ✆ **07634-0789**): Sunset is the best time to enjoy authentic Thai dishes such as *tom yum goong* (hot and sour prawn soup) and *yam tua plu* (winged bean salad), when you can watch the Andaman Sea change color as you appreciate the excellent cuisine. A pianist serenades diners, and there's a cigar and wine bar to retire to after dinner. See p. 248.
- **Dream Café** (Sukhothai; ✆ **05561-2081**): With a quiet courtyard out back and cool indoor seating, the Dream Café is reminiscent of an antiques store. It's also a fun find and a great place to relax after a day of temple touring. See p. 291.
- **Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant** (Mae Sot; ✆ **05553-2483**): This saucy spot boasts an organically inspired decor that's almost as much a reason to visit as the food. True, as the restaurant is out in the boonies on the Burmese border, the pseudo-posh design is out of sync with its surroundings. But the food is plain great and the atmosphere laid-back, if a bit surreal. See p. 296.
- **Le Grand Lanna** (Chiang Mai; ✆ **05388-8888**): Le Grand Lanna is definitely the most romantic northern

Thai restaurant in Chiang Mai. You'll feast in an old wooden stilt house amid ginger blooms and orchids, and dine on such fare as Burmese *khao soi* (noodle curry) and pomelo salad. Lunch and supper come with awesome views of the resort's lily pond, and, in the evening, you'll get the chance to see a delightful Lanna dance show. See p. 322.

- **The House** (Chiang Mai; ✆ **05341-9011**): Only supper is served at this vintage villa at the edge of the Old City of Chiang Mai. In cool, candlelit surrounds, Danish expat Hans Christensen's carefully trained kitchen staff serves up dynamic Pacific Rim cuisine. See p. 322.
- **Fern Restaurant and Bar** (Mae Hong Son; ✆ **05361-1374**): There's a touch of class about the antiques and potted-plant decor that makes this place the top choice near the Myanmar border. The menu is extensive, including tempting dishes such as fried Pai River fish with pepper and garlic. Food presentation is very attractive and service is extremely attentive, plus there's often live music in the bar out back. See p. 356.

8 THE BEST PARTY BEACHES

- **Pattaya** (Pattaya, Eastern Seaboard): The once-infamous red-light capital of Thailand, promiscuous Pattaya invites adulation as much as disdain with the dubious flavor of some of its late-night shenanigans. However, it's cleaning up slowly, and outwardly obscene "attractions" are making way for cleverer, cleaner entertainment. The clubs and bars attract a motley range of characters, giving it an air of a human zoo. Go to watch, and to be watched. See chapter 8.
- **Chaweng Beaches** (Ko Samui): If you like the beach, and love to be social, Chaweng has all the action you want. With countless dining and nightlife choices, plus endless vendors and beach boutiques, you'll never walk alone here. See chapter 9.
- **Had Rin** (Ko Phangan): The now-infamous Full Moon parties on Ko Phangan's Had Rin have been attracting crowds of raving revelers for years, but they are not the hippy-trippy events of yore, as parties are taking on a more "packaged" experience. Drug busts are on the rise and, despite the warnings, plenty of over-chilled partygoers continue to come undone, with serious consequences. See chapter 9.
- **Patong Beach** (Phuket): This busy beachside strip is not sophisticated by any means, but for many young, first-timers in Asia looking to party, it is seen as *the* place for shopping, dining, and naughty nightlife. If you want to avoid the sordid stuff, the most upmarket area is the JungCeylon mall, with great late-night dining and famous fast food and coffee outlets. Beyond this, there's a shantytown of small bars and concrete bunker clubs, where it's a lot seedier but where the younger frat-party crowd will get their kicks. See chapter 10.

9 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Scuba Diving:** Thailand is a great place to do a PADI course, whether you're a total beginner or just in need of a refresher course. Most courses are affordable and staffed by experienced expatriate dive pros. Always check first

that the vessels used by these outfits have valid marine safety documentation such as IMO, SOLAS, ISM, and the more recent ISPS certificates. The most popular centers—around Ko Chang, Ko Tao, and Phuket—have a large concentration of beautiful coral with an abundance of marine life. The best time of year for visibility is between December and February. See chapters 8, 9, and 10.

- **Ballooning:** From November to March, Thailand's cool north offers one of the few places in Asia to experience hot-air ballooning. The tour operator Earth Wind and Fire has been based in Chiang Mai for some years now and is the only certified ballooning outfit in Thailand. They offer predawn flights over the emerald rice paddies; as the sun rises, the beauty of the land will open up below you. See chapter 13.
- **Rock Climbing:** The imposing cliffs at Railay Beach, near Krabi, make for some of the best rock climbing in the world. And you don't have to be an expert; beginners are welcome to sign up for an intro course and enjoy both the challenge and breathtaking views. There's a similar setup near Chiang Mai in the north. See chapters 10 and 13.
- **White-Water Rafting** (Pai): On a white-water rafting tour, you can paddle through conservation areas and pass by canyon walls encrusted with fossils. Check locally for outfits that organize exciting yet safe tours from the laid-back center of Pai. See chapter 14.
- **Trekking** (Northern Thailand): Trekking is a perfect way to explore the country's great outdoors; it's definitely one of the best ways to get out and up into lush jungle terrain. Many worthy not-for-profit organizations are now involved in helping hill-tribe villagers build sustainable tourism initiatives, and it is well worth your time to visit and support these commendable causes. See chapters 12 through 14.

10 THE BEST OF NATURAL THAILAND

- **Khao Yai National Park** (Northeast): Thailand's oldest and most visited World Heritage Site supports an abundance of wildlife, from elephants and tigers to more than 300 species of birds. Hike along nature trails or camp out and hold a vigil in high watchtowers at night (the best time to see the nocturnal creatures in action). See chapter 7.
- **Ko Hong** (near Krabi): Few can remain unmoved when they enter this seemingly unassailable limestone rock mid-ocean. At its center is a vivid green pool completely surrounded by what seems like a limestone donut. Majestic sea eagles hover above while tropical fish flounder about in the clear waters below. See chapter 10.
- **Ti Lor Su Waterfall** (western edge of Central Plains): Thailand's biggest and most beautiful waterfall is hidden away near the Myanmar border, but it's well worth the trek to see it, especially at the end of the rainy season, in October/November. See chapter 11.
- **Doi Inthanon National Park** (North): Drive to the top of Thailand (2,565m/8,415 ft.) and experience the odd sensation of shivering in the tropics. Go walking on well-marked nature trails, and look out for rare birds twittering in the trees. Hire a tent or a log cabin, and breathe deeply of the pine-scented air. See chapter 13.

11 THE BEST CULTURAL VACATION ACTIVITIES

- **Fasting and Wellness Programs:** While you're on holiday in Thailand, it is now possible to address the damage that years of overindulgence have caused. Wellness centers, often close to beach resorts, have made a name for themselves by offering an alternative to the fast lane. Health programs may include yoga, tai chi, monitored fasting, and even colonic irrigation, but, best of all, they serve carefully prepared fresh food. A wide variety of options ensures there is something to satisfy everyone's search for his or her soul. One center to try is **The Spa, Ko Chang** (p. 172).
- **Meditation Programs:** Almost every Thai man enters the *sangha,* or monkhood, for some period of time, usually for just a few weeks as a young man and again later during marriage. Since the first Western spiritual seekers started coming in droves to Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s, many temples opened their doors to resident foreigners interested in practicing meditation. Courses in varying lengths and intensity exist; most follow the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Vipassana, or "Insight" meditation. In the south, try **Suan Mokkhabalarama** (near Surat Thani; p. 189). In the north, there's **Wat Rampoeng** (p. 331). Courses are held in Bangkok at **Wat Mahathat**, or The House of Dhamma (p. 135).
- **Learn Thai Massage** (nationwide): It is now easy to find massage schools all over Thailand. However, big-name spa **Chiva-Som,** in Hua Hin, has set up an academy in Bangkok's Sukhumvit Soi 63, where, unlike most places, a huge range of wellness techniques are at last being taught *in English* by bona fide therapists. See www.chivasomacademy.com, as well as p. 134.

12 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (Bangkok): This never-ending labyrinthine warren of stalls sells everything from commercial art to imitation designer-label gear. Whole sections are devoted to pets (including the selling of live reptiles), and there's a huge swath reserved for home-furnishing stalls. Get there early to ensure you can escape before the heat becomes oppressive. This is a great place to see Thailand's rising designer scene. See chapter 7.
- **Siam Paragon** (Bangkok): Hailed as *the* trendiest retail experience around, nothing in Asia quite beats Siam Paragon for its ostentatious glitz, designer brands, plush cinemas, and endless eateries—and I haven't even mentioned the vast underground oceanarium, Siam Ocean World. It outshines the city's other malls (Emporium, Gaysorn, and Erawan), though CentralWorld, just along the road, is newer and bigger still. There's easy access via Siam BTS. See chapter 7.
- **Thong Lor** (Bangkok): Head up to Sukhumvit Soi 55 for the latest in designer chic, upscale spas and cafes, and superb home-furnishing stores. Big boutiques, such as J Avenue—selling clothes and designer decor—as well as the delicious Greyhound Café attract Thailand's yuppies on weekends. See chapter 7.

- **Pak Klong Talad** (Bangkok): This old riverside flower market is open 24/7, and though its narrow lanes are sometimes hard to get down, it showcases the best of Thailand's botanical offerings. Go late at night, when the blossoms are fresh; or, if your home country's Customs regulations allow, pop in before heading home and purchase bouquets of orchids, perfumed ginger flowers, Strelitzia, or unscented roses, all for just a few dollars. See chapter 7.
- **JungCeylon** (Phuket): This is the latest shopping magnet to draw the hordes away from the older, tout-riddled beach strips. Swanky and bright (and air-conditioned), it's got not just fast-food diners and coffee shops, but also young brand fashion and sports stores, plus a whole basement crammed with some great Thai handicraft stalls. See chapter 10.
- **Nimmanhaemin Road** (Chiang Mai): This long stretch of road, starting at Amari Rincome Hotel, is now chockfull of designer boutiques, bespoke tailors, and chic art galleries. Here you can check out some of the nation's best traditional and new-age handicrafts, jewelry, lacquer, ceramics, wood, art, candles, and luxury items. I particularly like the funky furniture at **Wit's Collection.** See chapter 13.

13 THE BEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGHTS & MUSEUMS

- **The National Museum** (Bangkok): Simply the biggest and best repository of the nation's treasures. Objects from Thailand's long and varied history include beautiful stone carvings of Hindu deities, exquisite Buddha images, gold jewelry, ceramics, royal costumes, wood carvings, musical instruments, and more. See p. 127.
- **Ayutthaya:** The former capital of Siam was one of the world's largest and most sophisticated cities before it was ransacked by the Burmese in 1767. Today it remains one of Thailand's greatest historical treasures, with abundant evidence of its former majesty. It is easily reached in a day from Bangkok. See chapter 11.
- **Sukhothai:** Founded in 1238, Sukhothai (The Dawn of Happiness) was the capital of an early Thai kingdom. Many of the ruins of this religious and cultural center are skillfully preserved and well maintained in an idyllic setting. See chapter 11.
- **The Hall of Opium** (Near Chiang Saen at the Golden Triangle): This gargantuan edifice, entered by a subterranean tunnel, is a pleasure for visitors of all ages. Its exhibits explain the cultivation process and history of opium growth in the Golden Triangle region. Supported by the royal family, the modern complex is a stone's throw from the Mekong, and displays are highly informative and even shocking. See p. 367.

14 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS

- **Lamphun:** This charming town, close to Chiang Mai, is on the Kuang River, in a part of the country where few travelers visit. Its quiet temples echo times past; trishaws still meander through the sleepy town center. Just

outside are the relics of the early Haripunchai era that preceded the 12th-century Lanna kingdom. See chapter 13.

- **Pai:** Not your typical tiny mountain-valley farming village, Pai is a favorite for budget travelers who want to put their feet up and relax. The scenery is gorgeous, the many bungalows are cheap, and the restaurants are good. You'll want to stay longer than you planned. See chapter 14.
- **Chiang Rai:** Blessed with some lovely attractions, such as the Mae Kok River, and some delightful *wats,* this much-overlooked town also offers local crafts, such as silver, cotton, and hill-tribe crafts. See chapter 14.

15 THE MOST FASCINATING TEMPLES

- **Wat Phra Kaew** (Bangkok): With its flamboyant colors and rich details, this temple is a magnificent setting for Thailand's most revered image, the Emerald Buddha. Inside the main temple building, a profusion of offerings surround the pedestal that supports the tiny image. See p. 124.
- **Wat Po** (Bangkok): With schoolchildren racing around, masseuses practicing in sheltered *salas* and monks going about their business, this is a great example of a working temple, which functions as the hub of the community. The main attraction for tourists is the 43m (141-ft.) reclining Buddha image. See p. 126.
- **Wat Arun** (Bangkok): The Temple of Dawn shimmers in the sunrise across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok, but viewing it at sunset is better still. As you climb its steep central Khmer-style *prang,* you'll get a close view of the porcelain pieces that make up its floral design. See p. 131.
- **Wat Yai** (Phitsanulok): One of the holiest temples in Thailand, Wat Yai is home to the Phra Buddha Chinarat image, cast in bronze. A classic example of a Sukhothai image, the Buddha here is the prototype for many replicas throughout the country. Outside, the temple complex hums with activity, as many Thais make the pilgrimage here. See p. 288.
- **Wat Phra Singh** (Chiang Mai): While most Thais head here to see the revered Phra Sihing image, it's the delightful Lanna murals in the *Viharn Lai Kham* that surround the image that catch most people's eyes. Dating to around 1870, these faded illustrations include images of elephants, armies, and even fanciful impressions of early Western travelers. See p. 328.
- **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang** (Lampang): This temple is one of the oldest in North Thailand, and is considered one of the best examples of Lanna temple architecture. The eaves of its temple buildings swoop almost to the ground, and the interior panels are decorated with fading murals. The temple also houses a small but precious image called the Phra Kaew Don Tao, which is kept safely under lock and key. See p. 342.

2 Thailand in Depth

Sanuk mai? (Is it fun?) is a question frequently asked of foreigners in Thailand, and the choice of question says a lot about the priorities of this fun-loving place. Basically, for Thais, anything that is not *sanuk* (fun) is not worth doing, so a positive response to the query (*"Sanuk, krup"* for men or *"Sanuk, ka"* for women) is bound to be met with a beaming smile, showing pleasure that outsiders are able to enjoy Thai culture. This concern for the wellbeing of *farang* (foreigners) manifests itself in all aspects of visitors' experience; at the hotel, in the restaurant, at the bus station, or in a temple compound, you are likely to come across Thais eager to make your experience smoother and more enjoyable, if they possibly can.

The country is no longer as undiscovered or as cheap as it was a decade ago, and recent political infighting along with global economic instability have tarnished the country's image as a tropical paradise that is immune to the rest of the world's worries. Yet the fact that Thailand remains Southeast Asia's most popular destination shows that the magnetic attraction of its sparkling temples, idyllic beaches, mountain trails, spicy cuisine, and glitzy shopping malls is as strong as ever.

1 THAILAND TODAY

Most of Thailand's 66 million people live in the countryside or in rural villages, where they earn a living in agriculture, predominantly by rice farming. However, as in many developing nations, there is a constant drift of people from the country to the city, and Bangkok, the nation's capital, is now home to over 8 million. The city's inhabitants are divided between wealthy Thais, often of Chinese ancestry, who are educated and hold formidable positions, and mostly uneducated workers, who came from the rural hinterland (termed "upcountry" by Thais). Hierarchy, or class, is an important distinction to Thais, who, like many of the region's nations, follow a loose version of India's caste system. When a Thai meets someone, he or she can instantly size that person up and, depending on that individual's social status, will treat the person accordingly. Interestingly, as a foreigner, you are automatically awarded a position of stature, regardless of your social standing back home, just as long you don't flout Thai etiquette.

So, who exactly are the Thai people? It's hard to say. There really are no historically "ethnic" Thais. Today's Thais (about 75% of the population) emerged from waves of various immigrants going back around 10 centuries. "Looking Back at Thailand," below, explains these waves in greater detail, but, by and large, the main bloodline is infused with indigenous people from the Bronze Age, southern Chinese tribes, Mons from Myanmar (Burma), Khmers from Cambodia, Malays, Arabs, and Europeans, plus more recent immigrants from China, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Central Thailand is a true melting pot; however, southern Thais have a closer ancestral affinity with Malays, while Thais in the north are more closely related to the Chinese, Laotians, and Burmese. The north is also home to small groups of

Akha, Lisu, Lahu, Hmong, and Yao (p. 300)—brightly dressed hill-tribes who migrated south from China and Tibet during the past century. In the northeast province of Isan, Laotian influence prevails. The remaining 25% of the population are divided between Chinese (14%) and Indians, Malays, Karens, Khmer, and Mons (11%).

Despite this diversity of ethnic origin, when it comes to religion, over 95% of the country's inhabitants are Buddhist, and there are over 40,000 temples scattered around the country. There are small pockets of Christians, particularly in the north, where missionaries have had limited success in converting hill-tribes. Muslim communities tend to be concentrated in the south, where unpredictable attacks by separatists on schools and government buildings have made the southern provinces off-limits to tourists for some years now.

Unlike its neighbors, Thailand was never colonized, a fact which has helped to keep its rich culture undiluted and has undoubtedly contributed to the country becoming Southeast Asia's most popular tourist destination. The well-developed infrastructure makes it easy to make hotel booking; get around by plane, train, or bus; or get connected by phone or online. The 15 million or so visitors who arrive every year have made tourism the nation's biggest foreign exchange earner, an honor held not so long ago by rice, the staple food of the region. Thailand has a high number of return visitors, though exactly what endears them to the place varies according to individual taste. For some it's the glittering temples, for others it's a laid-back resort overlooking a tranquil beach, while for others it's the chance to go on a shopping spree, or to study meditation or Thai cooking. For many, the most memorable moments are encounters with the Thai people, who are generally warm and welcoming. Locals delight in any foreigner who takes an interest in their heritage, learns a little bit of the language, eats Thai food, and follows Thai customs. Above all, the Thai people have an incredible sense of humor—a light-hearted spirit and a hearty chuckle go a long way toward making friends.

After the economic crash of 1997, which started in Thailand but affected all Southeast Asian countries, the economy made an impressive recovery, but 12 years on, there are strong warning signs that it is in for a rough ride. Two significant events in late 2008 severely affected investor confidence: first the global financial crisis of September, then the occupation of Suvarnabhumi Airport in November by members of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Exchange rates have become less favorable for visitors, inflation is moving into double figures, and the cost of living is rising noticeably (so gone are the days of the 165B bungalow on the beach!).

Adding to the country's economic woes, the political climate has been unstable since the coup of 2006 that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Fragile alliances have come and gone and the country is currently led by Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democratic Party. The Democrats form part of the People's Alliance for Democracy, better known as the "yellow shirts," whose archenemy is the similar-sounding United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), better known as the "red shirts"—supporters of Thaksin. Both groups hold frequent rallies, at which scuffles often break out and occasionally boil over, as in Bangkok during the Songkran Festival in April 2009, when the red shirts eschewed the traditional water-splashing festivities in favor of hurling rocks and petrol bombs at the military. Tourists are never targeted in these conflicts, but it's best to steer clear of rallies where red and yellow shirts are in evidence.

2 LOOKING BACK AT THAILAND

EARLY HISTORY Archaeologists believe that Thailand was a major thoroughfare for *Homo erectus* en route from Africa to China and other parts of Asia. Stone tools, dating back some 700,000 years, have been excavated around Lampang in northern Thailand. Cave paintings, found throughout the country, are believed to originate as early as 2000 B.C.; these show people dancing and hunting, as well as domesticated and wild animals in grasslike settings that appear to be rice paddies. There are also images of different forms of marine life, dolphins (in the south), and catfish (in the north). Human remains have been excavated at many sites, the most famous of which, Ban Chiang, in the northeastern province of Udon Thani, contained copper and bronze items originally believed to date back to 4000 B.C., and said to be the earliest examples of the Bronze Age in Thailand. This suggests that this particular Bronze Age settlement developed independently of the few other world centers at this time. More accurate radiocarbon testing, however, has put Thailand's Bronze Age at about 2500 to 2000 B.C., which was in fact later than that of the Middle East and roughly at the same time as China's.

Modern civilization did not arrive in Thailand until about 1,000 years ago. There is archaeological evidence that points to areas in both central and southern China as a cultural heartland for the descendants of many of the peoples of Southeast Asia. These people began to appear in northern Southeast Asia in the first millennium A.D. and continued to migrate south, east, and west in waves over the following 8 centuries, settling primarily in what is now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma). Known as the ***Tai,*** they dispersed over a vast area of space and shared a similar culture and language. Their descendants are the core bloodline of the Thai people of today: the Shan of northern Myanmar, the Tai people of northern Laos, and the Lu of Yunnan province in southern China, as well as groups in Vietnam, on the Chinese island of Hainan, and others in northeastern India. The total number of Tai people today is estimated at 70 million.

The early Tais lived in lowland valleys in groups of villages called *muang* that were ruled over by a *chao* or feudal lord. They lived in stilted houses, making a living from subsistence agriculture. In times of threat, either to their economic stability or from outside aggression, many *muang* would combine forces. What developed were loosely structured feudal states where both lord and villager benefited—the lord from manpower and the villager from stability. The Tais expanded as ruling fathers sent sons out into the world to conquer or colonize neighboring areas, establishing new *muang* in increasingly broad regions.

THE DVARAVATI (MON) PERIOD From the 6th century, Southeast Asia underwent a gradual period of Indianization. Merchants and missionaries from India introduced Brahmanism and Buddhism to the region, as well as Indian political and social values—and art and architectural preferences. Many Tai groups adopted Buddhism, combining its doctrine with their own animistic beliefs. But the true significance of India's impact can be seen in the rise of two of the greatest Southeast Asian civilizations—the Mon and Khmer.

The **Mon** were the earliest known inhabitants of Lower Burma, and it was they who introduced writing to the country as well as Buddhism. Around the 6th century A.D., their sphere of influence expanded, and they established Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Mon settlements

can be found at Lamphun, near Chiang Mai; Lopburi; Nakhon Pathom; Nakhorn Ratchasima (also called Khorat); and into Cambodia and northern Laos. Sadly, this once-proud race now numbers only around a million, most of whom are struggling to retain their culture in Myanmar (Burma) in the face of military oppression, though many have fled to Thailand and live, mostly in refugee camps, near the border west of Kanchanaburi.

THE SRIVIJAYA EMPIRE In the southern peninsula, the **Srivijaya Empire,** based in Java, Indonesia, began to play an important role in cultural affairs. Before the 9th century A.D., southern port cities had drawn traders from all over the region and beyond. However, the Srivijayas, who had assimilated their own unique brand of Buddhism from India, would leave a lasting impression on these cities, linking them with other parts of Southeast Asia by importing Buddhism and Buddhist art. While the empire never actually conquered the area, its cultural influence is still evident in Nakhon Si Thammarat and from the southern art of this period. Some historians argue that Chaiya, near Surat Thani, could have been the capital of the empire for a time, but the claim is largely disputed. Srivijaya power, ground down by endless warring with southern India, headed into decline and disappeared from Thailand by the 13th century.

THE KHMERS By the early 9th century A.D., the **Khmer Empire** had risen to power in Cambodia, spreading into surrounding areas. Indravaraman (877–89) saw the kingdom reach Nakhorn Ratchasima (Khorat) in northeastern Thailand. **Suryavarman I** (1002–50) extended the kingdom to the Chao Phraya River valley and north to Lamphun, driving out the Mons. **Suryavarman II** (1113–50) pushed the kingdom even farther, forcing the Mons still deeper into Myanmar (Burma) until his death in 1150.

With each conquering reign, magnificent Khmer temples honoring Hindu deities were constructed in outposts, thus expanding the Cambodian presence in the empire. Brahmanism, having been brought to Cambodia with traders from southern India, influenced not only Khmer religion and temple design (with the distinct corncob-shaped *prang,* or tower), but also government administration and social order. Conquering or forcing villages into their control, the Khmers placed their own leaders in important centers and supplied them with Khmer administrative officers. The empire was extremely hierarchical, with the king exerting supreme power and ruling from his capital.

The populations of these outposts were largely Tai, and while the Khmers had the authority, Tais were assimilated as laborers, slaves, and temple workers. A temple bas relief at Angkor that shows a stiff orderly regiment of Khmer soldiers following unkempt and fierce-looking Tais clearly demonstrates the Khmer attitude toward what they called Syam.

Angkor, Cambodia's great ancient temple city, was built during the reign of Suryavarman II. It is believed the temples of Phimai and Phanom Rung, in Isan province, predated the Khmers' capital temple complex, thus influencing its style. By this time, however, the Khmer empire was already in decline. The last great Khmer ruler, **Jayavarman VII** (1181–1219), extended the empire to its farthest limits—north to Vientiane in Laos, west to Myanmar (Burma), and down to the Malay peninsula. It was he who finally shifted Khmer ideology away from Hindu-based religion toward Buddhism, which eventually led to temples constructed in Khmer style. His newfound Buddhism inspired him to build extensive highways (portions of which are still evident today), plus more than 100 resthouses for travelers, and hospitals in the outer provinces. Jayavarman VII's death in 1220 marks

Thailand's final break from Khmer rule. The last known Khmer settlement in Thailand is at Wat Kamphaeng Laeng in Phetchaburi.

THE LANNA KINGDOM: THE NORTHERN TAIS By A.D. 1000, the last of the Tai immigrants had traveled south from China to settle in northern Thailand. Several powerful centers of Tai power—Chiang Saen, in northern Thailand; Xishuangbanna, in southern China; and Luang Prabang, in Laos—were linked by a common heritage and the rule of extended families. In the region, *muang* grew stronger and better organized, but internal conflict remained a problem. In 1239, a leader was born in Chiang Saen who would conquer and unite the northern Tai villages and create a great kingdom. Born to the king of Chiang Saen and a southern Chinese princess, **Mengrai** ascended the throne in 1259 and established the first capital of the Lanna kingdom at Chiang Rai in 1263. He then conquered and assimilated what remained of Mon and Khmer settlements in northern Thailand, and, in 1296, shifted his base of power to Chiang Mai, which translates to "The New City."

The Lanna empire would strengthen and ebb over five periods; at its height, it extended into Burma (now Myanmar); Luang Prabang, in Laos; and Yunnan province, in China. Lanna society mixed animist beliefs with Mon Buddhism. Retaining Mon connections with what is today Sri Lanka, the Lanna era saw the rise of a scholarly Buddhism with strict adherence to orthodox doctrines. Lanna kings were advised by a combination of monks and astrologers and ruled over a well-organized government bureaucracy. Developments were made in transportation and irrigation, medicine, law, and the arts through religious sculpture, sacred texts, and poetry. By and large, the people were only mildly taxed and were allowed a great deal of autonomy.

It was the expansionist Mongols under Kublai Khan who began to threaten Lanna with forays into the region. Mengrai succeeded in keeping these marauders at bay by allying his kingdom with Shan leaders in Myanmar (Burma) and two separate Tai kingdoms to the south; one of these was **Sukhothai,** which in time would rise to a position of dominance.

SUKHOTHAI: THE DAWN OF SIAMESE CIVILIZATION While Mengrai was busy building Lanna, a small southern kingdom was simultaneously growing in power. After the demise of first the Dvaravarti civilization and later the Khmers, the Tai people who had migrated south to the Chao Phraya River valley found themselves in small disorganized vassal states. A tiny kingdom based in Sukhothai would dwell in obscurity until the rise of founding father King Indraditya's second son, Ram. Single-handedly defeating an invasion from neighboring Mae Sot, on the Burmese border, Ram proved a powerful force, winning the respect of his people. Upon his coronation in 1279, **Ramkhamhaeng,** or "Ram the Bold," set the scene for what is recognized as the first truly Siamese civilization.

In response to the Khmers' authoritarian approach, Ramkhamhaeng established himself as an accessible king. It is told he had a bell outside his palace for any subject to ring in the event of a grievance. The king himself would come to hear the dispute and would make a just ruling on the spot. He was seen as a fatherly and fair ruler who allowed his subjects immense freedoms. His kingdom expanded rapidly, it seems; through voluntary subjugation, it reached as far west as Pegu in Myanmar (Burma), north to the Laotian cities of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and south beyond Nakhon Si Thammarat, to include portions of present-day Malaysia.

After centuries of divergent influences from external powers, we see for the first time an emerging culture that is uniquely

Siamese. The people of the central plains had a mixed heritage made up of Tai, Mon, Khmer, and indigenous people, with Indian and Chinese elements woven into their cultural tapestry. Ramkhamhaeng was a devout Buddhist, adopting the orthodox and scholarly Theravada Buddhism from missionaries hailing from Nakhon Si Thammarat and Sri Lanka. A patron of the arts, the king commissioned many great Buddha images. While few sculptures from his reign remain today, those that do survive display a cultivated creativity. For the first time, physical features of the Buddha are Siamese in manner. Images have graceful, sinuous limbs and robes, insinuating a radiant and flowing motion. Ramkhamhaeng initiated the many splendid architectural achievements of Sukhothai and nearby Si Satchanalai. He is also credited with developing the modern Thai written language, derived from Khmer and Mon examples of an archaic South Indian script. Upon Ramkhamhaeng's death in 1298, he was succeeded by kings who would devote their attentions to religion rather than affairs of state. During the 14th century, Sukhothai's brilliant spark faded almost as quickly as it had ignited.

AYUTTHAYA: SIAM ENTERS THE GLOBAL SCENE In the decades that followed, the nation faltered with no figurehead, until the arrival of U Thong—the son of a wealthy Chinese merchant family. Crowning himself **Ramathibodi,** he set up a capital at Ayutthaya, on the banks of the Lopburi River. From there, he set out to conquer what was left of the Khmer outposts, eventually engulfing the remains of Sukhothai. The new kingdom combined the strengths of its population—Tai military manpower and labor, Khmer bureaucratic sensibilities, and Chinese commercial talents—to create a strong empire. Ayutthaya differed greatly from its predecessor. Following Khmer models, the king rose above his subjects atop a huge pyramid-shaped administration. He was surrounded by a divine order of Buddhist monks and Brahman sanctities. During the early period of development, Ayutthaya rulers created strictly defined laws, caste systems, and labor units. Foreign traders from China, Japan, and Arabia were required to sell the first pick of their wares to the king for favorable prices. Leading trade this way, the kingdom was buttressed by great riches. Along the river, a huge fortified city was built with temples that equaled those in Sukhothai. This was the **Kingdom of Siam** that the first Europeans, the Portuguese, encountered in 1511.

But peace and prosperity would be disrupted with the coming Burmese invasion that would take Chiang Mai (part of the Lanna kingdom) in 1557, and finally Ayutthaya in 1569. The Lanna kingdom that King Mengrai and his successors built was never to regain its former glory. Fortunately, Ayutthaya had a better fate with the rise of one of the greatest leaders in Thai history. **Prince Naresuan,** born in 1555, was the son of the puppet Tai King—placed in Ayutthaya by the Burmese. Although Naresuan was a direct descendent of Sukhothai leaders, it was his early battle accomplishments that distinguished him as a ruler. Having spent many years in Burmese captivity, he returned to Ayutthaya to raise armies to challenge the Burmese. His small militias proved inadequate, but in a historic battle scene, Naresuan, atop an elephant, challenged the Burmese crown prince and defeated him with a single blow.

With the Tais back in control, Ayutthaya continued through the following 2 centuries in grand style. Foreign traders—Portuguese, Dutch, Arab, Chinese, Japanese, and English—not only set up companies and missions, but some also attained positions of power within the

administration. Despite numerous internal conflicts over succession and struggles between foreign powers for court influence, the kingdom managed to proceed steadily. While its Southeast Asian neighbors were falling under colonial rule, the court of Siam was extremely successful in retaining its own sovereignty. It has the distinction of being the only Southeast Asian nation never to have been colonized—a point of great pride for Thais today.

The final demise of Ayutthaya would be brought about by two more Burmese invasions. The first, in 1760, was led by **King Alaunghpaya,** who would fail, retreating after he was shot by one of his own cannons. But 6 years later, two Burmese contingents, one from the north and one from the south, would besiege the city. The Burmese raped, pillaged, and plundered the kingdom—capturing fortunes and laborers for return to Burma. The Thai people still hold a bitter grudge against the Burmese for these atrocities.

THE RISE OF BANGKOK: THE CHAKRI DYNASTY The Siamese did not hesitate to build another capital. **Taksin,** a provincial governor of Tak in the northern central plains, rose to power on military excellence and charisma. Over time he was able to successfully propagate the false notion that he was in fact divinely appointed as ruler. Rather than build upon the ashes of Ayutthaya, Taksin moved the capital to Thonburi Si Mahasamut, an already-well-established settlement on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River, now engulfed by modern Bangkok. Within 3 years he'd reunited the land from the previous kingdom, but his rule would not last. Legend tells that Taksin suffered from paranoia and his claims to divinity offended many, including the monastic order. His own wife, children, and monks were purported to have been murdered on his orders. Regional powers acted fast. He was swiftly kidnapped, placed in a velvet sack, and beaten to death with a sandalwood club—so no royal blood touched the soil. He was then buried secretly in his own capital. These same regional powers turned to the brothers Chakri and Surasi, great army generals *(phraya),* who had recaptured the north from Burma, to lead the land. In 1782, Phraya Chakri ascended the throne as **King Ramathibodi,** founder of today's Chakri dynasty.

The Thai capital was relocated by the new king across the Chao Phraya River to the settlement of Bangkok, where he built the Royal Palace, royal homes, administrative buildings, and great temples. The city teemed with canals as the river played a central role in trade and commerce. Siam was now a true melting pot of cultures, no longer limited to the Tai, Mon, and Khmer descendants of former powers, but now including Arab, Indian, European, and powerful Southern Chinese clans. Ramathibodi's first priorities involved reorganizing the Buddhist monkhood under an orthodox Theravada Buddhist doctrine and reestablishing the state ceremonies used during the Ayutthaya period, with less emphasis on Brahman and animistic rituals. He revised all laws so they were based upon the notion of justice. He also wrote the Ramakien, based upon the Indian Ramayana, which has become a beloved Thai tale and a subject for many Thai classical arts, such as dance and shadow theater.

Despite military threats from all directions, the kingdom continued to grow through a succession of kings from the new royal bloodline. Ramathibodi, later known as Rama I, and his two successors expanded the kingdom to the borders of present-day Thailand and beyond. Foreign relations in the modern sense were developed during this early era with formal ties to European powers.

King Mongkut (r. 1851–68) had a unique upbringing. During his time as a monk, a tradition all Thai men are expected to follow even today, he developed an avid curiosity, which, throughout his reign, led to enormous innovation, dynamism, and appreciation for the West. His son, **King Chulalongkorn** (r. 1868–1910), led Siam into the 20th century as an independent nation, by establishing an effective civil service, formalizing global relations, and introducing industrialization. He united the royal line under the title Rama and assigned the title Rama I to the dynasty's first king. Mongkut thus became **Rama IV,** and his son, **Rama V.** It was King Mongkut who employed Anna Leonowens (who was the inspiration behind the character Anna, in *The King and I*) as an English tutor for his children. Her account of court life is still considered grossly inaccurate and offensive by Thais; indeed anyone found with copies of the book, or the movies—all of which are banned—can be tried for lèse-majesté.

The reign of **King Prajadhipok, Rama VII** (r. 1925–35), saw the growth of the urban middle class, and the increasing discontent of a powerful elite. By the beginning of his reign, economic failings and bureaucratic bickering weakened the position of the monarchy, which was severely affected by the Great Depression. To the credit of the king, there had been a call to instate a constitutional monarchy, but, in 1932, a group of midlevel officials went ahead and instigated a coup d'état. Prajadhipok eventually abdicated in 1935.

THAILAND IN THE 20TH & 21ST CENTURIES Democracy had a shaky hold on Siam. Its original constitution, written in 1932, was more a tool for leaders to manipulate than a political blueprint. Over the following decades, government leadership changed hands fast and frequently. The army has always had an imposing influence, most likely the result of its ties to the common people as well as its strong unity. In 1939, the nation adopted the name "Thailand"—land of the free.

During World War II, democracy was stalled in the face of the Japanese invasion in 1941. Thailand speedily submitted, choosing collaboration over conflict, even going so far as to declare war against the Allied powers. But at the war's end, no punitive measures were taken against Thailand, thanks to the Free Thai Movement organized by Ambassador Seni Pramoj in Washington, D.C., who had placed the declaration of war in his desk drawer rather than delivering it.

Thailand avoided direct involvement in the Vietnam War but assisted the Americans by providing runways for their B-52s and storage for the toxic defoliant Agent Orange. In turn, it benefited enormously from U.S. military-built infrastructure. The United States pumped billions into the Thai economy, bringing riches to many but further impoverishing the rural poor, who were hit hard by the resulting inflation. Communism became an increasingly attractive political philosophy to the poor as well as to liberal-minded students and intellectuals. A full-scale insurrection seemed imminent, and this naturally fueled further political repression by the military rulers.

In June 1973, thousands of Thai students demonstrated in the streets, demanding a new constitution and a return to democratic principles. Tensions grew until October, when armed forces attacked a demonstration at Thammasat University in Bangkok, killing 69 students and wounding 800, paralyzing the capital with terror.

The constitution was restored and a new government was elected. Many students, however, were not yet satisfied and continued to complain that the financial elite were still in control and resisting

change. In 1976, student protests again broke out, and there was a replay of the grisly scene of 3 years before at Thammasat University. The army seized control in an effort to impose order, and another brief experiment with democracy was at an end. **Thanin Kraivichien** was installed as prime minister of a new right-wing government, which suspended freedom of speech and of the press, further polarizing Thai society.

In 1980, **Prem Tinsulanonda** became prime minister, and during the following 8 years he managed to bring remarkable political and economic stability to Thailand. The Thai economy grew steadily through the 1980s, fueled by Japanese investment and the departure of Chinese funds from Hong Kong.

Things changed dramatically in July 1997, when Thailand became the first victim of the Asian Economic Crisis. Virtually overnight, the Baht lost 20% of its value, followed by similar downturns in money markets throughout other major Asian nations. A legacy of suspicious government activity is linked to industry, massive overseas borrowing, inflated property markets, and lax bank lending practices. In November of 1997, **Chuan Leekpai** was elected to power to lead the country out of crisis, but 3 years later, Thais were still unsatisfied.

In January 2001, the Thai people elected Populist candidate **Thaksin Shinawatra.** A self-made telecom tycoon, ex–police officer, and member of one of the nation's wealthiest families, Thaksin came into office promising economic restructuring and an end to widespread corruption and cronyism. Thaksin's popularity grew from aggressive reforms that brought the country out of debt. In November 2003, Thailand paid back its $12 billion loan to the International Monetary Fund, money borrowed during the 1997 currency crisis. The popular prime minister also waged a "War on Poverty and Dark Influence," cracking down on mafia activity and bribery; however, his tactics were often heavy-handed and wholly ignored human rights. Most glaringly, he is held responsible for the on-the-spot killing of suspected drug traffickers (estimates claim that as many as 3,000 people were shot dead with no legal process during his reign). Similarly, Thaksin's aggressive response to Muslim unrest in the far south came under international criticism.

In September 2006, the Royal Thai army, backed by the King, staged a bloodless coup d'état. Thaksin, who was preparing to address the United Nations in New York, was ousted overnight. During 2007, under the military junta, democratic reforms were stalled, press freedoms were curbed, and Thaksin's own Thai Rak Thai party was banned from politics for 5 years. Meanwhile, the tycoon and his family have been convicted in absentia for fraud.

Elections held in December 2007 passed without much disturbance, but the surprising outcome gave the People's Power Party (PPP)—run by followers of former Prime Minister Thaksin—victory. However, without a clear majority, the party was forced into an uneasy coalition with five other parties, headed by **Samak Sundaravej.** In September 2008, Samak was replaced by **Somchai Wongsawat,** but after the occupation of Suvarnabhumi Airport by yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) supporters in November 2008, Somchai also had to step down, and the PPP was dissolved, to be replaced by the Pheua Thai, or "For Thai" party. The head of the Democratic Party, **Abhisit Vejjajiva,** managed to form a coalition to take the reins of government, though riots in Bangkok, in April 2009, by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD; supporters of Thaksin who wear red shirts) represented a further step in the polarization of politics

in Thailand between the red shirts and yellow shirts—UDD vs. PAD.

Throughout his life, **HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej** has played an active role in stabilizing the nation, and many wonder if he will attempt to defuse the current political crisis. The King has been the nation's figurehead since 1946 and now, in his 80s, is the world's longest reigning monarch. A compassionate man, he commands enormous loyalty from the Thai people by promoting cultural traditions and supporting rural reforms, especially among the poor.

3 RELIGION IN THAILAND

Thai culture cannot be fully appreciated without some understanding of Buddhism, which is practiced by 95% of the population. The Buddha was a great Indian sage who lived in the 6th century B.C. He was born **Siddhartha Gautama,** a prince who was carefully sheltered from the outside world. When he ventured beyond the palace walls, he encountered an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering monk. He concluded that a never-ending cycle of suffering and relief exists everywhere. Sensing that the pleasures of the physical world were impermanent and the cause of pain, he shed his noble life and went into the forest to live as a solitary ascetic. Nearing starvation, however, he soon realized this was not the path to happiness, so he turned instead to the "Middle Way," a more moderate practice of meditation, compassion, and understanding. One night, while mediating under a Bodhi (fig) tree after being tormented by Mara, the goddess of death, Siddhartha Gautama became enlightened. With his mind free of delusion, he gained insight into the nature of the universe and viewed the world without defilement, craving, or attachment but as unified and complete. He explained his newfound ideology, **The Dhamma,** to his first five disciples, at Deer Park in India, in a sermon now known as "The Discourse on Setting into Motion the Wheel of the Law."

After the death of Buddha, two schools were formed. The oldest, **Theravada** (Doctrine of the Elders), is sometimes referred to, less accurately, as Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle). This school of thought prevails in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. It focuses on the enlightenment of the individual with emphasis on the monastic community and the monks who achieve nirvana in this lifetime. The other methodology, **Mahayana** (the Greater Vehicle), is practiced in China, Korea, and Japan, and subscribes to a notion of all of mankind attaining enlightenment at the same time.

The basic document of Thai, or Theravada, Buddhism is the **Pali canon,** which was documented in writing for the first time in the 1st century A.D. The doctrine is essentially an ethical and psychological system in which no deity plays a role in the mystical search for the intuitive realization of the *oneness* of the universe. While it is a religion without a god, Theravada traditions follow a certain hierarchy based on age among monks and practitioners. The practice requires individuals to find truth for themselves through an inward-looking practice cultivated by meditation and self-examination. Although interpretation varies, the Buddha's final words are said to be "strive on with diligence."

If there is no deity to worship, then what, you might ask, are people doing in temples prostrating themselves before

images or statues of the Buddha? Worshipers bow three times before the image: once for the Buddha himself, once for the *sangha* (the order of monks), and once for the *dhamma* (truth). Prostrations at the temple are also a way to honor Buddhist teachers and those who pass on the tradition, to show respect for the Buddha's meditative repose and equanimity, and to offer reverence for relics (most temples house important artifacts, especially in the stupa).

Buddhism has one aim only: to abolish suffering. Buddhist practice offers a path to rid oneself of the causes of suffering, which are desire, malice, and delusion. Practitioners eliminate craving and ill will by exercising self-restraint and showing kindness to all sentient beings. Monks and members of the Buddhist Sangha, or community, are revered as those most diligently working toward enlightenment and the attainment of wisdom.

Other aspects of the philosophy include the law of karma, whereby every action has an effect and the energy of past action, good or evil, continues forever and is "reborn." (Some argue, though, that the Buddha took transmigration quite literally.) As a consequence, *tam bun* (merit making)—basically performing any act of kindness no matter how small—is taken very seriously.

Merit can be gained by entering the monkhood, which most Thai males do for a few days or months to study Buddhist scriptures and practice meditation. But these days it can equally be gained by transferring Frequent Flyer points to a charity.

When monks in Thailand go on their alms round each dawn, they are not begging, but are giving Buddhist devotees an opportunity to make merit; similarly, those who sell caged birds, which people purchase and then set free, are allowing them to gain merit by freeing the birds. When making merit, it is the motive that is important—the intention in the mind at the time of action—which determines the karmic outcome, not the action itself. Buddhism calls for self-reliance; the individual embarks alone on the Noble Eightfold Path to Nirvana with the aim "to cease to do evil, learn to do good, cleanse your own heart."

Theravada Buddhism does not seek converts, nor does it ask practitioners to believe in any truths but those they learn themselves through experience and meditation. Opportunities to study Buddhism or practice meditation in Thailand are abundant. There are a number of programs designed particularly for foreigners, as practicing, in fact, is the best way to understand the heart of Buddhism. See p. 214 for some suggestions.

Most Chinese and Vietnamese living in Thailand follow Mahayana Buddhism, and several temples and monasteries in the country support this tradition as well. Other religions and philosophies are also followed in Thailand, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Sunni Islam is followed by more than two million Thais, mostly in the south. Most are of Malay origin and are descendants of the Muslim traders and missionaries who spread their teachings in the southern peninsula in the early 13th century. There are approximately 2,000 mosques in Thailand.

Christianity was first introduced in the 16th century by generations of Jesuit, Dominican, and Franciscan missionaries from Europe and later Protestant missionaries from America, yet even after centuries of evangelism, there are only a quarter of a million Christians living in the country, suggesting that most Buddhists have no interest in changing their belief system. Nevertheless, Thais have accepted much that has come from Christian missionaries, particularly ideas on education, health, and science.

Thai Etiquette

Thai customs can be a bit confusing; foreigners are not expected to know and follow local etiquette to the letter, but good manners and appropriate dress will earn you instant respect. A few small gestures and a general awareness will help foster a spirit of good will. First-time visitors are sure to make a few laughable mistakes; read below carefully in order to avoid the more offensive faux pas.

Thais greet each other with a graceful bow called a ***wai.*** Palms and fingers are pressed flat together, fingers pointing up; the higher they are held, the greater the respect, with fingertips touching the top of the forehead forming the most respectful *wai*. Younger people are expected to *wai* an elder first, who will usually return the gesture. Foreigners are more or less exempt from this custom. In hotels, doormen, bellhops, and waitresses will frequently *wai* to you. It's not necessary to return the greeting; a simple smile of acknowledgment is all that's necessary. In situations where a *wai* is appropriate, such as when meeting a person of obvious status, a friend's mother or father, or a monk, don't fret about the position of your hands. To keep them level to your chest is perfectly acceptable. Two exceptions—never *wai* a child, and never expect a monk to *wai* back (they are exempted from the custom).

An important aspect of the Thai character is that they expect a certain level of **equanimity, calm, and light-heartedness** in any personal dealings. If you are prone to temper, aggravation, and frustration, Thailand can be a challenge. Displays of anger and confrontational behavior, especially from foreign visitors, get you nowhere. Thais don't just think such outbursts are rude but believe them to be an indication of a lesser-developed human being. Getting angry and upset is in essence "losing face" by acting shamefully in front of others, and Thai people will walk away or giggle, to spare revealing their embarrassment. Travelers who throw fits often find themselves ignored or abandoned by the very people who could help.

So what do you do if you encounter a frustrating situation? The Thai philosophy advocates ***jai yen,*** meaning, "Take it easy. Chill." If it's a situation you can't control, such as a traffic jam or a delayed flight—*jai yen.* If you find yourself at loggerheads with the front desk, arguing with a taxi driver, or in any other truly frustrating situation, keep calm, try a little humor, and find a nonconfrontational, compromising solution that will save face for all involved.

4 THAILAND'S ART & ARCHITECTURE

The **Sukhothai period** (13th–14th c.) is regarded as a period of notable achievement in Thai culture, with big advancements made in art and architecture. One of the lasting legacies of the Sukhothai period is its sculpture, characterized by the graceful aquiline-nosed Buddha either sitting in meditation or, more strikingly,

The Thais hold two things sacred: their religion and their royal family. In temples and royal palaces, **strict dress code** is enforced. Wear long pants or skirts, with a neat shirt, and tops with shoulder-covering sleeves. Remove shoes and hats before entering temple buildings and give worshipers their space. Young Thai society may seem very liberal, but it is in fact remarkably conservative and sartorially prudish. You will notice that most Thai women cover their shoulders and wear knee- or ankle-length hemlines. Men tend to wear a mix of casual-smart gear with collared shirts and would never be unkempt. In the city, it is considered extremely improper to dress in cutoff shorts, skimpy tops, or postage-stamp miniskirts. This may look good for a night's clubbing, but is regarded by locals as unacceptable attire—unless you are working in a go-go bar, or want to give that impression. On beaches, topless sunbathing is never accepted by locals, many of whom are Muslim.

While **photographing** images is generally allowed, do not climb on any image or pose near it in a way that could be seen as showing disrespect. Women should be especially cautious around monks, who are not allowed to touch members of the opposite sex. If a woman needs to hand something to a monk, she should either hand it to a man to give to the monk, or place the item in front of him.

Never, ever, say anything critical or improper about the **royal family,** past or present, not even in jest. Never deface images of royalty (on coins, stamps, or posters); this will result in a hefty prison sentence. In movie theaters, everyone is expected to stand for the national anthem, which is played before every screening.

Thais avoid **public displays of affection.** While straight members of the same gender often hold hands, or walk arm in arm (this includes men), you'll rarely see a Thai man and woman acting this way. Thai women who date foreign men flaunt these rules openly, but as a rule of thumb, Thais frown upon lovers who touch, hug, or kiss in public.

Buddhists believe **the feet** are the lowliest part of the body, so using the foot to point or touch an object in Thailand is unbelievably insulting. Do not point your feet at a person or a Buddha image, or use your foot to tap a runaway coin (it bears the king's image).

In contrast, **the head** is considered the most sacred part of the body. Don't touch a Thai on the head or tousle a child's hair, but rather offer a friendly pat on the back. Even barbers have to ask permission to touch a customer's crown.

walking contemplatively. These Buddha figures are considered to be some of the most beautiful representations ever produced of this genre. The city of Sukhothai itself is said to be an expansion of the decorative style typified by Khmer works. With the inclusion of Chinese wood building techniques, polychromatic schemes, and elegant lines from Japanese-influenced carvings, the ***wat,*** or temple—with its murals, Buddha sculptures, and spacious design—is defined as the first "pure" Thai Buddhist style. During this period came the mainstays of Thai temple

architecture: the *chedi* (stupa), *bot, viharn, prang, mondop,* and *prasat.*

The dome-shaped ***chedi***—better known in the West as stupa—is the most highly regarded edifice here. It was originally used to enshrine relics of the Buddha, but later included holy men and kings. A stupa consists of a dome or tumulus, constructed atop a round base (drum), and enveloped by a cubical chair, representing the seated Buddha, over which is the *chatra* (umbrella) in one or several (usually nine) tiers. There are many types of stupas in existence in Thailand: The tallest, oldest, and most sacred is the golden *chedi* of Nakhon Pathom (p. 147).

The ***bot*** (*ubosoth* or *uposatha*) is the ordination hall, which is generally off-limits to women. It consists of either one large nave or a nave with lateral aisles built on a rectangular design with Buddha images mounted on a raised platform. At the end of each ridge of the roof are graceful finials, called *chofa* (meaning "sky tassel"), which are reminiscent of animal horns but are thought to represent celestial geese or the **Garuda** (a mythological animal ridden by the god Shiva). The triangular gables are adorned with gilded wooden ornamentation and glass mosaics.

The ***viharn*** (*vihaan* or *vihara*) is the assembly hall where the abbot conducts sermons. The design is similar to that of the *bot,* and the hall is also used to house Buddha images, but it is generally a larger building. The ***prang,*** which originated with the corncob tower of the Khmer temple, is a form of stupa that can be seen in many temples at Sukhothai and Ayutthaya. The ***mondop*** may be made of wood or brick. On a square pillared base, the pyramidal roof is formed by a series of receding stories, enriched with elaborate decoration, and tapering off to a pinnacle. It may be used to enshrine holy objects, or it may serve as a library for religious ceremonial objects, as it does at Wat Phra Kaew (p. 124) in Bangkok.

The ***prasat*** (castle) is a direct stylistic descendant of the Khmer temple, with its round-topped spire and Greek-cross layout. At the center is a square sanctuary with a domed *sikhara* (tower) and four porchlike antechambers that project from the main building, giving the whole temple a multileveled contour. The *prasat* serves either as the royal throne hall or as a shrine for venerated objects, such as the *prasat* of Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok, which enshrines the statues of the kings of the present dynasty.

Less recognized architectural structures include the *ho trai* (library), which houses palm-leaf books; the *sala,* an open pavilion used for resting; and the *ho rakhang,* the Thai belfry.

The Ayutthaya and Bangkok periods further cultivated the Sukhothai style by refining materials and design. The **Ayutthaya period** saw a Khmer revival, when Ayutthayan kings built a number of neo-Khmer-style temples and edifices. The art and architecture evident in early Bangkok allude to the dominant styles of the former capital. After the demise of Ayutthaya in the 18th century, the capital was established briefly at Thonburi before being moved across the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok, where replicas of some of Ayutthaya's most distinctive buildings were constructed. Khmer, Chinese, northern Thai, and Western elements were fused to create temples and palaces in what is now known as the **Rattanakosin style,** of which the key features are height and lightness, best exemplified at Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace (p. 124) in Bangkok.

Over time, Thailand's architectural and artistic development has become increasingly diluted, somewhat compromisingly, by the West. During the latter days of the Ayutthaya period, Jesuit missionaries and French merchants brought with them distinctly baroque fashions. Although Thailand was initially reluctant to foster

relations with the West, these European influences eventually became evident in architecture. **Neoclassical devices** were increasingly apparent, notably in the Marble Temple (p. 131), in Bangkok, which was started by King Chulalongkorn in 1900 and designed by his half-brother, Prince Naris. This style can also be seen in the splendid riverside facade of Siam Commercial Bank (1908), near the River City shopping complex. Thanks to a number of Italian engineers, Art Deco became an important style in Bangkok and is seen today at the arched Hua Lamphong Rail Station, the Governor's House, and along Ratchadamnoen Avenue. In fact, the style is so ubiquitous that many writers use the term **Thai Deco** to describe certain buildings.

Today's Bangkok is almost indistinguishable from other Asian capitals; a mix of Thai classical, modernist, neo-Greco, Bauhaus, and Chinese shophouse styles all meld into a unique, urban mishmash. Sadly, vernacular styles, such as old Thai wooden houses, are rapidly being cleared and the ***klongs*** (canals) filled to give way to high-rise offices and apartments. Happily, efforts are now being made by a new generation of educated Thais to bring architectural integrity to the city, and some of the most interesting results can be seen in new shopping malls such as CentralWorld (p. 139) and Siam Paragon (p. 139).

5 THE LAY OF THE LAND

Thailand is in the center of Southeast Asia, roughly equidistant from China and India, and shares cultural affinities with both. It borders Myanmar (Burma) to the north and west, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia (Kampuchea) to the east, and Malaysia to the south. Thailand's southwestern coast stretches along the Andaman Sea, and its southern and southeastern coastlines border the Gulf of Thailand (still often called the Gulf of Siam). The country covers approximately 514,000 sq. km (198,000 sq. miles)—about the size of France or California—and spans over 1,600km (over 1,000 miles) from north to south. It is divided into six major geographic zones, within which there are 75 provinces. The zones are the mountainous north, the Khorat Plateau in the northeast, the central plains, the eastern seaboard, the western hills, and the southern peninsula.

THAILAND'S ECOSYSTEMS

These different geographical regions provide a large variety of ecosystems, which support a great diversity of animal and plant life. Most of the country's forests are deciduous or montane, such as those in the northern hills, where the summit of **Doi Inthanon** forms the highest point in Thailand at 2,565m (8415 ft.). There are a few pockets of primary rainforest on the southern peninsula, in places such as **Khao Sok National Park.** Other ecosystems that predominate on the southern peninsula and eastern seaboard are coastal forests, mangrove swamps, and coral reefs. Around half of these reefs are under the nominal protection of marine national parks, such as **Ko Similan** and **Ko Tarutao,** both off the Andaman Coast. Several regions of the country, most notably Phang Nga Bay, are characterized by karst outcrops—islands or mountains of porous limestone that conceal caves and pristine lagoons.

FLORA & FAUNA

Thailand boasts a fantastic range of plant and animal life, though many species are under threat due to loss of habitat. There are around 15,000 vascular plants, including over 500 types of trees and 1000 types

of orchids. Most of these plants are typical of tropical climates, such as **palms, teak,** and **bamboo,** though at higher elevations in the north, it is not uncommon to find such things as pines, ferns, and rhododendrons, which are more familiar in temperate zones. The country is particularly well-blessed with birds, many of which winter in the country, and over 1,000 species have been sighted to date. These include common species, such as **bulbuls** and **mynahs,** but also rarities, such as **great hornbills** and **sarus cranes.** As for mammals, around 300 species have been recorded, including **primates, deer, civets, tigers,** and **elephants,** most of which survive under national park protection, but all are under constant threat from poachers. For information on sustainable issues in the country, see p. 51 in "Planning Your Trip to Thailand."

WATCHING WILDLIFE

The best place to watch wildlife in Thailand is in the country's national parks. Since the first one was established at Khao Yai in 1962, more than 100 have been opened, and they now occupy around 13% of the country's land area—more than most countries. Most have log-cabin-style accommodation and campsites that can be reserved through the National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department website (http://web2.dnp.go.th/parkreserve/nature.asp?lg=2).

Khao Yai National Park, just 120km (75 miles) from Bangkok, is one of the best places to see wildlife, and on a typical trail, visitors are likely to see gibbons, macaques, deer, and hornbills, especially in the company of guides who know the habits of these creatures and where they are likely to be at a certain time of day. **Doi Inthanon National Park** in the north is particularly popular with birders, while divers looking for coral reefs teeming with tropical fish usually head for the marine national parks in the Andaman Sea, such as **Similan** and **Surin.**

6 THAILAND IN POPULAR CULTURE

BOOKS

Tiziano Terzani's book *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* may not be exclusively about Thailand, but the late Italian journalist offers a well-crafted portrait of the interlocking cultures of Asia. The book tells of the superstitions and rituals affecting all aspects of Southeast Asian culture in an autobiography detailing a year of overland travels in a bid to outdo a fortuneteller's premonition of his death.

Carol Hollinger's *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* is a personal history of time spent in the kingdom some 30 years ago, but the cultural insights are quite current.

For help in understanding what the heck is going on around you in Thailand, pick up Philip Cornwel-Smith's *Very Thai;* it's a bit obvious in parts but does make for colorful and fun entertainment (don't expect any deep intellectual insights). It will, however, explain some peculiar habits of the host country. Or there's the more practical *Culture Shock! Thailand,* by Robert and Nanthapa Cooper.

The hilariously funny 2004 book *Bangkok Inside Out,* by Daniel Ziv and Guy Sharrett, has now been banned in Thailand (due to its containing an image of a smiling, topless bar girl in the arms of a foreign man). That fact alone says a lot. If you do get hold of a copy overseas, you'll find a raw, no-holds-barred, tell-it-how-it-is book.

Phrase books and Thai-English dictionaries are sold everywhere; for a comprehensive study of Thai, pick up a copy of *Thailand for Beginners,* by Benjawan Becker.

Books on Buddhism and Thai Theravada traditions are endless: Look for works by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, founder of an international meditation center in the south of Thailand, and author of the *Handbook for Mankind* and *The ABCs of Buddhism.* Also look for writings by Jack Kornfield, an American who writes about meditation practices in such works as *A Path with Heart.* Phra Peter Parrapadipo's *Phra Farang,* literally "the foreign monk," tells the story of an Englishman who chose to go into the Buddhist monkhood; it makes for an unusual read.

These days, there are plenty of big glossy tomes covering all aspects of Thai design, old and new. *Modern Thai Living,* by Devahastin na Ayudhaya, is a great example of how modern interiors can combine rustic and contemporary elements. In the book, the author collaborates with Thai floral designer Sakul Intakul, who is celebrated in Bangkok for bringing a radical postmodernist approach to Thai floral arrangements. For a great insight into Thailand's northern Lanna history, pore over a copy of Ping Amranand and William Warren's exemplary *Lanna Style,* or the more academic guide to temple design in the north, the sumptuously illustrated *Lanna, Thailand's Northern Kingdom,* by photographer Michael Freeman.

FILMS

Since 1974, when a debonair Roger Moore—playing the irrepressible secret agent James Bond—was seen speeding across a turquoise Phang Nga Bay in *The Man with the Golden Gun,* Thailand has attracted moviemakers. Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* (and the much maligned film of the same name, featuring Leonardo DiCaprio) tells the seedy story of young backpackers in search of the perfect hideaway. They swim to a remote island (the filmmakers shot at Maya Bay on Ko Phi Phi Le), where they join a community of marijuana-stoked dropouts living in supposed bliss. Surprise, surprise, things go awry. Environmentalists might suggest that there are some pretty stark parallels in reality. After filming finished in 1998, locals accused the moviemakers and ensuing tourists of ruining the site. True enough, to this day, dozens of longtails oozing oil into the turquoise seas rock up on what is now called "The Beach," and heaps of litter are left in their wake. Is it a case of "art reflecting real life," or perhaps vice versa?

MUSIC

Thais love music, and the country has a long musical tradition dating back to at least the 7th century, especially in the rural hinterland. Most smart hotel lobbies are the stage for a Thai couple in gorgeous silks who play slow, rhythmic tunes on classical stringed instruments such as a *saw sam sai* (a vertically held, 3-string fiddle) or on a circular set of gongs called a *khong wong.* Country music is a more lively and raucous alternative; like in the U.S., it's become popularized in the last decade.

Jazz is increasingly popular among old and young as well. Thailand's king (who is an accomplished composer and musician) has been especially helpful in exposing Thais to jazz. Thailand has a number of homegrown pop stars who pump out Thai-language hits and have a huge teen following, too.

7 EATING & DRINKING IN THAILAND

Food is one of the true joys of Thailand. If you are not familiar with Thai cooking, imagine the best of Asian food ingredients combined with the sophistication of fragrant spices, sweet coconut or citrus, and topped off with ripe red and green chilies.

You can find all styles of Thai (and international) cooking in Bangkok, from southern fiery curries to smooth northern cuisine. Where restaurants serve a variety of regional dishes, they are marked in this guide as Thai cuisine, though in a few cases where they specialize in Northern Thai or Royal Thai cuisine (dishes that were formerly eaten only by royalty), they are marked as such. Basic ingredients range from shellfish, fresh fruits, vegetables—asparagus, bean sprouts, morning glory, baby eggplant, bamboo shoots, and countless types of mushrooms—and spices, including lemongrass, mint, chili, garlic, and coriander (cilantro). Thai cooking also incorporates coconut milk, curry paste, peanuts, and a large variety of noodles and rice.

Among the popular dishes you'll find are *tom yum goong,* a Thai hot-and-sour shrimp soup; *satay,* charcoal-broiled chicken, beef, or pork strips skewered on a bamboo stick and dipped in a peanut-coconut sauce; spring rolls (similar to egg rolls but thinner and usually containing only vegetables); *larb,* a spicy chicken or ground-beef salad with mint-and-lime flavoring; spicy salads, made with a breadth of ingredients, but most have a dressing made with onion, chili pepper, lime juice, and fish sauce; pad Thai, rice noodles fried with large shrimp, eggs, peanuts, and fresh bean sprouts; *khao sawy,* a northern-style Burmese soup with light yellow curry and layers of crispy and soft noodles; a wide range of explosive curries; and spicy *tod man pla,* fried fish cakes with a sweet honey sauce. If you're feeling adventurous, pick up a snack of fried crickets, bamboo grubs, or red ant eggs that are sold in markets countrywide (see the "Cricket, Anyone?" box, on p. 116).

Seafood is a great treat in Thailand and is served at a fraction of the cost one would pay elsewhere. In the south, Phuket lobster (a giant langoustine) has no pincers and a firm trunk, and is generally different from the cold water variety you'll get in Maine or Brittany.

A word of caution: Thais enjoy incredibly spicy food, much hotter than is tolerated in even the most piquant Western cuisine. Protect your palate by saying "*Mai khin phet,*" meaning "I do not take it spicy." Also note that most Thai and Chinese food, particularly in the cheaper restaurants and food stalls, is cooked with a lot of MSG (known locally as *phong churot*), and it's almost impossible to avoid. If you don't want MSG, say "*mai sai phong churot.*" However, if you're dining in restaurants where foreign clientele are regulars, the kitchen usually will have made allowances for this.

Traditionally, Thai menus don't offer fancy desserts. The most you'll find are coconut milk–based sweets or a variety of fruit-flavored custards, but the local fruit is luscious enough for a perfect dessert. Familiar fruits are pineapple (sometimes served with salt and chili powder), mangoes, bananas, guava, papaya, coconut, and watermelon. Less familiar options are durian (in season during May and June, this Thai favorite is an acquired taste, as it smells like old socks); mangosteen (a purplish, hard-skinned fruit with delicate, whitish-pink bits that melt in the mouth but stain your hands and clothes, and is available Apr–Sept); and jackfruit (large and green with a thick, thorny skin that envelops tangy-flavored flesh and is available in June and July). The pink litchi, which ripens in April, and the smaller tan-skinned longan, which comes in season in July, have very sweet white flesh. Other unusual fruits include tamarind (a sour, pulpy seed in a pod that you can eat fresh or candied); rambutan (small, red, and hairy with transparent sweet flesh clustered around a woody seed, available May–July); and pomelo (similar to a sweet and thirst-quenching grapefruit, available

Overcoming a Fear of Food Stalls

Considering the fact that, in Western countries, most people judge the potential quality of a restaurant's food by the smartness of its decor, it's hardly surprising that many visitors to Thailand can never bring themselves to order food from a street food stall. Typically, they suspect that hygiene will be poor, and with such cheap prices, surely the cooks must use inferior ingredients? The fact that most such stalls have no English menu also dissuades potential customers.

Breaking through this fear of food stalls is a major step toward appreciating the fantastic variety of Thai cuisine. For a start, try to forget the hygiene concerns, as all Thais are meticulous about cleanliness in food preparation. (To be certain, check all ingredients for freshness, and make sure that anything you eat is prepared fresh and hasn't been languishing on liquefied ice for ages.) Also, because most stalls sell a single dish, they need to select the best ingredients to gain a competitive edge. As for the lack of a menu, you can overcome this by simply pointing at a dish you would like to sample. So next time you feel peckish as you walk past a food stall giving off an appealing aroma, do as the Thais do—sit down and eat!

Aug–Nov). Some of these fruits are served as salads; pomelo and raw green papaya salads, for example, are excellent.

Thai families usually have an early breakfast of *khao tom,* a rice soup to which chicken, seafood, or meat may be added. Typically, it's served with a barely cooked egg floating on top and a variety of pickled vegetables, relishes, and spicy condiments to add flavor.

Thais take eating very seriously and also love to snack nonstop. Business lunches consist of several dishes, and some hotels offer blowout buffets at very reasonable prices, but most casual diners have a one-course rice or noodle dish. Most restaurants throughout the country offer lunch from 11am to 1pm; in Bangkok, street eateries, markets, and food stalls are packed during this busy time.

Thais usually stop at one of the country's many streetside food stalls for a large bowl of noodle soup (served with meat, fish, or poultry), or dine at a department store food court where they can buy snacks from many different vendors and have a seat in air-conditioning. A note on etiquette: You won't see Thais walking down the street munching. Take a seat while you eat.

Dinner is the main meal, and for a Thai family this usually consists of a soup *(gaeng jued);* a curried dish *(gaeng phet);* a steamed, fried, stir-fried, or grilled dish (*nueng, thod, paad,* or *yaang*); a side dish of salad or condiments *(krueang kiang);* steamed rice *(khao nueng);* and some fruit *(ponlamai).* Thais always share a variety of dishes (typically balanced as sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and spicy), helping themselves to a spoonful at a time (to avoid being wasteful). All dishes are served together and are sampled by diners in no particular order. Thai cuisine has no concept of "courses," though restaurants that cater to foreigners generally manage to serve a soup before main course if Western food is ordered.

In Thailand men enjoy a strong drink; the majority of well-educated women and many practicing Buddhists abstain from alcohol. Liquor, beer, and soft drinks are widely available—from 11am to 2pm and 5pm to midnight—at 7-Eleven stores and supermarkets. Most bars serve liquor until around 1am, except on Buddhist holidays, though a few with special dispensation in tourist areas stay open until the small hours. Thailand brews several beers; the best known is Singha, though Leo and Chang are cheaper, popular brands that still have a kick. Imported beers, such as Heineken, are also widely available. Despite high costs, wine is becoming a favorite among the country's middle class; local Thai and regional vintages are increasing in quality, too.

Mekong and Sang Som are two of the more popular local "whiskeys," even though the latter is more like rum (fermented from sugarcane). Thais will either buy a bottle or bring one to a restaurant where they can buy ice and mixers—usually Coke or soda water. Beware that some of the cheaper varieties are reputedly laced with some nasty chemicals.

Carbonated drinks, such as Fanta, Coke, and Pepsi, are sold everywhere. Fruit-shake vendors make fruit smoothies on the street, but diabetics should know that, at these street stalls, even fresh carrot or watermelon juice is heavily sweetened with thick syrup; insist on no syrup ("*mai sai naam waan*") and keep an eye on the beverage being made. *Gek huey* (chrysanthemum juice) is another popular treat.

Water is served at most meals although you may have to ask for ice *(nam khaeng).* Many shops sell affordable bottled or filtered water. Do not purchase the inexpensive water in light-blue plastic bottles (sold on the street), as it contains no sodium or minerals and will not remedy dehydration. If you suffer from the heat, stock up on electrolyte drinks such as Gatorade, or inexpensive rehydration powders, sold in sachets. Both items are available from 7-Eleven stores.

TIPS ON DINING

One of the greatest joys of visiting Thailand is the plethora of dining options in any area. From high-class hotel restaurants with elegant buffet luncheons to simple, friendly diners, you'll find it all, and in this edition I list the whole range. To give an idea of how much it will cost, restaurants are divided into categories: **Very expensive** means that a meal for one without drinks will probably cost over 1,000B; in **expensive** places, expect to pay from 500B to 1,000B; **moderate** covers the range from 200B to 500B; and **inexpensive** means you'll pay less than 200B per person.

Storefront restaurants and street vendors, apart from those in a specified night market area, are open early morning to late at night. To ease congested streets, food vendors are now banned in Bangkok on Mondays. Restaurants catering to tourists also open from morning until late. You're not expected to tip at most Thai restaurants, but rounding up the bill or leaving 20B on top of most checks is much appreciated. (A 15%–20% tip will shock and awe in smaller restaurants, but will be readily expected at fine-dining outlets.)

Thais are very practical about table manners. If something is best eaten with the hands, then feel free. If there are seeds or bones, you can spit them out onto the table or into a tissue. Single-serve noodle soups are usually eaten with chopsticks and a Chinese spoon. Rice dishes are eaten with a spoon and fork; the spoon is commonly held in the right hand, and the fork in the left is used only to load the spoon for delivery. Follow local customs if you wish, but do whatever you're comfortable with.

Note: In small towns featured throughout this guide, many dining (and nightlife) spots don't have working land lines; in those cases, mobile numbers are provided wherever possible.

8 TIPS ON SHOPPING

While Thais love bargaining, they do not appreciate haggling over a few baht. Sometimes such tourists will be impolitely referred to as *kee neow* (meaning "stingy" or "cheapskates" in Thai). If the initial asking price is more than twice what you are prepared to pay, it probably isn't worth entering negotiations.

Customs officers in many countries are now actively searching bags of tourists returning from Thailand and confiscating any pirated CDs and DVDs, designer knockoffs, and copy watches. In places like the U.S., U.K., and Australia, the import of counterfeit merchandise is a crime and you, as the buyer, will have your holiday purchases confiscated. A purchase may be "low dollar" to you, but when thousands of copies are sold, it damages the businesses that create and pay for the copyright of these models. Every year, media reports also confirm that earnings from these underground counterfeit industries go toward money laundering, drug production, prostitution, and child trafficking. By not buying fake brands, you are not just abiding by the law, but helping stamp out racketeering that ruins lives.

Warning! Shopping Scams

Gems, fake goods, illegal betting: Every year naive tourists take the bait and get caught in a scam. To beat the cheats, follow these simple rules:

- If anyone approaches you on the street and offers to take you to a shop (or anywhere, for that matter), refuse.
- If a tuk-tuk or taxi driver wants to take you shopping say, "No thanks" (or *"Mai ao, khop khun"*).
- Be suspicious of strangers who flash TAT, Tourist Police, or any other "badge" in order to get something from you.
- Know that there is no such thing as a government auction, government clearinghouse, or anything "government"-related to the gems industry.
- There is no such thing as a tax-free day for gemstone purchases.
- Do not agree to let any gem purchases be shipped to your home address.
- As with any purchase you make, if you use a credit card, keep the card in your sight at all times and watch the store assistant make one print of it.

3

Planning Your Trip to Thailand

Here you'll find all of the nuts and bolts necessary for planning a hassle-free trip to Thailand. Vital information includes suggestions on when to visit Thailand and what documents you'll need, how to get there and get around, health and safety pointers, travel resources, how to stay connected, and other tips that can make the difference between a smooth ride and turbulent times.

1 WHEN TO GO

It's wise to study the weather information below, as an ill-timed trip can mean pouring rain, debilitating humidity, or seas too rough for diving or beach activity. The high season for tourism throughout the kingdom is the North American/European winter period, mid-October through late February. Prices skyrocket and hotels fill up then, so be sure to make advance reservations. Off-season weather, however, is not intolerable, and some travelers report joyfully trading the crowded beaches and high prices of high season for a bit of off-peak discomfort. Low season is generally composed of the odd rainy afternoon, significant savings, and a lot more elbow-room. Because this coincides with school holidays in the U.S. and Europe, there is a mini high season in July/August when families head for the kingdom.

Thailand has two distinct climate zones: **tropical** in the south and **tropical savanna** in the north. The northern, northeastern, and central areas of the country (including Bangkok) experience three distinct seasons. The **hot season** lasts from March to May, with temperatures averaging in the upper 90s Fahrenheit (mid-30s Celsius), and with April being the hottest month. Normally, this period sees sporadic rain.

In recent years, however, the **rainy season** has begun in April and has lasted, on and off, until late November, or even December. The average temperature is 84°F (29°C) with 90% humidity. While the rainy season brings heavy downpours, it is rare to see an all-day episode. From June, daily showers will usually come in the late afternoon or evening for 3 to 4 hours, often bringing floods and forcing traffic to a standstill. Trekking in the north is not recommended during this time. In Bangkok, expect smog from April to August.

The **cool season,** from November to February, has temperatures from the high 70s°F to low 80s°F (26°C–29°C), with infrequent showers. Daily temperatures can drop as low as 60°F (16°C) in Chiang Mai and 41°F (5°C) in the hills; 1 or 2 nights may even see frost.

The **Southern Thai Peninsula** has intermittent showers year-round and daily downpours during the rainy season (temperatures average in the low 80s Fahrenheit/30s Celsius). If you're traveling to Phuket or Ko Samui, it would be helpful to note that the two islands alternate peak seasons. Optimal weather on Phuket occurs between November and April, when the island welcomes the highest

numbers of travelers. Conversely, Ko Samui's great weather lasts from about February to October. Refer to each destination's section for more information about peak seasons and changing weather patterns.

HOLIDAYS

Many holidays are based on the Thai lunar calendar, falling on the full moon of each month; check with the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; www.tat.or.th) for the current year's schedule. Chapter 12, "Exploring Northern Thailand," includes a list of festivals and events specific to the north.

On National and Buddhist holidays and on polling days, government offices, banks, small shops, and offices—as well as some restaurants and bars—usually close. By law, bars cannot serve alcohol on HM Queen Sirikit's birthday in August, nor on HM King Bhumibol's birthday in December. ***Note:*** In most cases there will be little advance warning given to shop, restaurant, or bar customers. Public transport still runs on holidays, though.

January to March

Thailand celebrates New Year's Day the same as the rest of the world. In **late February** or **early March** (depending on the lunar cycle) is **Makha Bucha Day,** when temples celebrate Buddha preaching to his disciples.

April

Chakri Memorial Day (Apr 6) commemorates the founding of the current Chakri dynasty.

Songkran is the New Year according to the Thai calendar, and it's an event that begins officially on April 13 and lasts 3 days, though water splashing begins about a week before in the countryside. After honoring local monks and family elders, folks hit the streets for massive water fights. Be warned—foreigners are the Thais' favorite target and such areas as Khao San Road become messy war zones where everyone gets soaked (police included) and then covered in flour or colored powder. Truck-mounted power hoses can cause damage, and cellphones, cameras, and valuables should be kept in Ziploc bags. Wear your oldest clothes—anyone expecting to stay dry will be sorely disappointed!

May

National Labor Day falls on the 1st, while **Coronation Day,** celebrating the coronation of HM King Bhumibol in 1946, is on the 5th. **Visakha Bucha Day,** marking the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, falls around mid- to late **May,** depending on the lunar calendar.

July

Thais celebrate the **Buddhist Lent** immediately following **Asarnha Bucha Day** in mid-July (depending on the lunar calendar), signaling the beginning of the rains' retreat and the 3-month period of meditation for all Buddhist monks—this was the day that the Buddha delivered his first sermon to his first five disciples.

August

August 12 honors the birthday of HM Queen Sirikit and is also **Mother's Day.**

October

On **October 23, Chulalongkorn Day,** the country's favorite king, Rama V, is remembered.

November

Loy Krathong, in early November, is Thailand's most romantic festival, although it's not usually a public holiday. After dark, handmade banana-leaf vessels are launched down rivers, and lanterns are hoisted into the sky in order to symbolize the release of sins. The most spectacular celebrations are in Sukhothai and Chiang Mai.

December

December 5 marks HM King Bhumibol's birthday and is also **Father's Day.** December 10 is **Constitution Day** and recognizes Thailand's first constitution in 1932.

THAILAND CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Check with the **Tourist Authority of Thailand** (✆ **1672;** www.tat.or.th, and listings in each chapter) for more information on the events listed below as well as for other holidays celebrated throughout the country. Also see specific chapters for local information and schedules. For an exhaustive list of events beyond those listed here, check http://events.frommers.com, where you'll find a searchable, up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities all over the world.

January/February

Chinese New Year, nationwide. Head for any Chinatown to see the vivid parades, firecrackers, and Lion Dances associated with this holiday. Things get most raucous in Bangkok's Yawarat district (Chinatown). It falls anytime from mid-January to mid-February, during which many businesses close for the week.

February

Flower Festival, Chiang Mai. When all of the north is in bloom, Chiang Mai springs to life with parades, floats decorated with flowers, and beauty contests. First weekend in the month.

March

King's Cup Annual Elephant Polo Tournament, used to be held in Hua Hin but now takes place near Chiang Rai, in the Golden Triangle. Mahouts and madcap international polo players meet to battle it out in a hilarious but worthy weeklong tournament that raises money for Thailand's main elephant charities. Entrance is free, and the tournament happens during the last week of the month.

April

Pattaya Festival, Pattaya. Parades and fireworks accompany a food festival and lots of partying, during the first week of the month.

July

Koh Samui Regatta, Koh Samui. Late July brings yachtsmen and partygoers from all over to enjoy a week of fiercely competitive ocean races.

October

Vegetarian Festival, Phuket. In this bizarre religious ritual, devotees spear, pierce, and percolate themselves while in a trance. It's not for the fainthearted! It takes place the second week of the month, and lasts for 9 days.

Naga Fireballs, Nong Khai, Isan. During this event, crowds gather along the river hoping to witness red glowing balls rising from the waters; they're thought to be methane bubbles released from the riverbed. The second or third week of the month.

November

Elephant Roundup, Surin. Elephant parades and cultural performances take place during the third weekend of November.

December

King's Cup Regatta, Phuket. Global competitors race yachts, in this exciting international event, which takes place the second week of December.

2 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

PASSPORTS

All visitors to Thailand must carry a valid **passport** with **proof of onward passage** (a return or through ticket). Visa applications are not required, if you are staying less than 30 days and are a national of 1 of 41 designated countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (New Zealanders may stay up to 3 months).

VISAS

For information on obtaining a visa, please see "Fast Facts," on p. 381.

CUSTOMS

What You Can Bring into Thailand

It is prohibited by law to bring the following items into Thailand without a license: narcotics, pornography, firearms and ammunition, blood, live animals, and agricultural products. Tourists are allowed to enter the country with 1 liter of alcohol and 200 cigarettes (or 250g of cigars or smoking tobacco) per adult, duty free, and there is no official limit on perfume. Customs no longer deem photographic film, PCs, or cameras as restricted items, as long as they are taken out of the country upon departure.

What You Can Take Home from Thailand

Pay more attention to what you can actually import to your home country, as Thai export Customs are rather lax. However, one exception is cultural treasures: It is forbidden to take antique or authentic Buddha images or Bodhisattva images or fragments out of the kingdom. Special permission is required for removing antique artifacts from the country. You will be required to submit the object along with two 5×7-inch photographs showing a frontal view of the object, your passport, and a photocopy of your passport notarized by your home embassy. The authorization process takes 8 days. For further details, contact the **Department of Fine Arts,** Na Phra That Road, next to Thammasat University (✆ **02224-2050**), open weekdays 8:30am to 4:30pm.

Please note: This is an issue only if the object in question is an antique, especially one that has been removed from a temple or palace, or a piece that has particular historic value to the kingdom. If you purchase a small Buddha image or reproduction, whether an amulet or a statue, you can ship it home or pack it in your bag. Any antique dealer will be able to notify you about which images require special permission.

MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS

No inoculations or vaccinations are required unless you are coming from, or passing through, areas infected with yellow fever, but do verify what may be recommended. Yellow fever certificates are required for those coming from 42 African and South American countries.

3 GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

GETTING TO THAILAND

By Plane

When you plan your trip, consider that Thailand has more than one international airport. While most international flights arrive in Bangkok's **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (airport code BKK; ✆ **02132-1888**), you can also fly directly

to **Phuket** (airport code HKT; ✆ **077632-7230-7**), **Ko Samui** (airport code USM; ✆ **07742-22512-9**), and **Chiang Mai** (airport code CNX; ✆ **05327-0222-33**) from certain regional destinations such as Singapore or Hong Kong. Flight times from the U.S. to Thailand vary from 17 hours (from San Francisco or LA) to 22 hours (from New York). Stopovers add even more time, so it's worth opting for a direct flight if you want to avoid severe jet lag. Thai Airways' direct flights from Los Angeles or New York keep travel time to a minimum. Check destination chapters for details on flying within Thailand, or to find out which airlines travel to Thailand, please see "Airline, Hotel & Car-Rental Websites," p. 385.

By Bus

Private buses link Singapore and Malaysia with Had Yai in southern Thailand, but be aware that violent insurgencies in south Thailand are a real cause for concern. In Singapore, call the **Singapore Tourism Board** at ✆ **800/736-2000,** and in Malaysia, contact the **Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board** (✆ **1300/885-050**) for more information. In the northeast, buses run from the Thai border at Nong Khai where pedestrians arrive across the Friendship Bridge from Laos. Tuk-tuks (three-wheeled, motorized, open vehicles, also called "jumbos") take travelers to the bridge from Vientiane. Call **Laos Tourist Information,** in Vientiane, at ✆ **856-21/212-248** for information.

By Train

Thailand is accessible via train from Singapore and peninsular Malaysia. **Malaysia's Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM)** begins in Singapore (✆ **652/6222-5165**), stopping in Kuala Lumpur (✆ **603/2267-1200**) and Butterworth (Penang; ✆ **604/323-7962**), before heading for Thailand, where it joins service with the State Railway of Thailand. **Bangkok**'s **Hua Lamphong Station** is centrally located on Krung Kasem Road (✆ **02220-4334** or 1690). Taxis, tuk-tuks, and public buses wait outside the station and access to the MRT (subway) is a few steps away.

The ***Eastern & Oriental Express*** (www.orient-express.com) operates a 2-night/3-day journey between Singapore and Bangkok that makes *getting* there almost better than *being* there. The romance of 1930s colonial travel is joined with modern luxury in six Pullman cars, seven State cars, a Presidential car, plus two restaurant cars, a bar car, a saloon car, and an observation car. Along the way, stops are made in Penang (Georgetown) and Kanchanaburi (River Kwai) for light sightseeing. Current fares per person one-way are $2,200 for a Pullman superior double. At certain times of the year, promotions will include overnights at the Oriental Bangkok and its sister property, the Mandarin Oriental, Singapore. Call ✆ **800/524-2420** in the U.S., or **65/6395-0678** in Singapore.

By Ship

Silversea Cruises and Crystal Cruises are two of the main cruise ships that visit the region. They call by Phuket before steaming on to Singapore or Malacca. These floating resorts have endless restaurants, Jacuzzis, pools, fitness centers, spas, deck games, and all manner of bars and lounges. For information on **Crystal Cruises** contact **888/722-0021** or check the website, www.crystalcruises.com. **Silversea Cruises** can be contacted in the U.S. at **800/722-9955,** or visit their website at www.silversea.com.

GETTING AROUND

Thailand's domestic transport system is accessible, efficient, and inexpensive. If your time is short, fly. But if you have the time to take in the countryside, travel by bus, train, or private car. Read on for details about all your transport options.

For tips on deciphering Thai addresses, see p. 78 in Chapter 5.

By Plane

Bangkok's large domestic airport, **Don Muang Airport** (airport code DMK; ✆ **02535-1111**), may not be as glitzy as the newer Suvarnabhumi International Airport (see "By Plane," under "Getting to Thailand," above), but it still works fairly well; domestic flights depart from both airports, so make sure you go to the right one for your flight. Airports in other cities usually tend to be more basic but will have money-changing facilities, information kiosks, and waiting ground transportation. In very small towns, you'll have to arrange airport pickup either through your hotel or the airline.

Most domestic flights are on **Thai Airways,** part of Thai Airways International (✆ **02545-3690-92;** www.thaiair.com), with Bangkok as its hub. Flights connect Bangkok with 11 domestic destinations, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Phitsanulok, Krabi, and Phuket. There are also some connecting flights between these cities.

The budget subsidiary of Thai Airways, **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com) has a head office in the Sathorn district. It operates on lesser-used routes, as does the no-frills carrier **One-Two-GO** (✆ **1126;** www.fly12go.com), based at Asoke, in the Klong Toey district.

The growing fleet at **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02265-5678,** or -5555 for reservations; www.bangkokair.com) now covers 19 destinations across Asia and is the sole operator of the Phuket to Ko Samui, and Bangkok to Trat routes. It also has international flights to Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, Myanmar, Laos, China, and Cambodia, as well as to The Maldives.

Serving some northern cities, **PB Air** (✆ **02326-8000;** www.pbair.com) is a less-well-known carrier. **SGA Airways** (✆ **02641-4190;** www.sga.co.th) is a professional outfit using 12-seater Cessna Grand Caravan aircraft for short domestic hops from Chiang Mai up to Pai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son. Flights can be chartered for private use out of Suvarnabhumi International Airport. A small fleet of amphibious light aircraft owned by **Destination Air** (✆ **07632-8637;** www.destinationair.com) fly out of Phuket to such nearby resorts as Krabi, Ko Phi Phi, and Ko Lanta.

Also check what's on offer from **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999** in Bangkok; www.airasia.com). They now fly between Bangkok and 10 Thai cities, as well as offering good value fares internationally.

Note that as of 2007, the 700B airport tax is now included in the price of all international air tickets, as are the domestic airport taxes.

By Car

Renting a car is easy in Thailand, but driving it is another matter. Driving in Bangkok is particularly hard; the one-way streets, poor and even incorrect road signage, and constant traffic jams prove frustrating. Outside the city, it is a better option, although Thai drivers are unashamedly reckless—many never learned to drive, ignore basic rules, and have a total disregard for road safety. Foreign drivers must reorient themselves fast and Americans need to readjust to driving on the left.

Among the many car-rental agencies, both **Avis** (✆ **02255-5300;** www.avisthailand.com) and **Budget** (✆ **02203-2094;** www.budget.co.th) each have convenient offices around the country. All drivers are required to have an international driver's license. Self-drive rates start around 1,200B per day for a family-sized sedan, much more for luxury vehicles or SUVs.

Local tour operators in larger destinations, such as Chiang Mai, Phuket, or Ko Samui, will rent cars for considerably less money than the larger, more well-known agencies. Sometimes the savings are up to 50%. All companies will need to see your international driver's license and a valid

credit card, in case of damage. Check insurance coverage—if you are taken to court for an accident, you may be found guilty for not being properly covered. Don't sign unless it's included. If you're wary of driving yourself, ask about rates for a car and driver, which can be very reasonable.

Gas stations are conveniently located along highways and in towns and cities throughout the country. Esso, Shell, Caltex, and PTT all have competitive rates.

See p. 46, under "Safety," for tips on driving in Thailand.

By Train

Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (see "By Train," under "Getting There," above) is a convenient, user-friendly facility, though, as always in busy transport hubs, you should be on the alert for scams. Clear signs point the way to public toilets, coin-operated phones, the food court, and the baggage check area. A Post & Telegraph Office, information counter, police box, ATMs, and money-changing facilities are dotted around the main area. You'll find plenty of small convenience shops and a baggage check too.

From this hub, the State Railway of Thailand provides regular service to destinations as far north as Chiang Mai, northeast to Nong Khai, east to Pattaya, and south to Thailand's southern border, where it connects with Malaysia's *Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad* (KTM), with service to Penang (Butterworth), Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. Complete schedules and fare information can be obtained at any railway station, or by calling **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** directly at ✆ **02220-4334,** or via their information hotline at ✆ **1690.**

The State Railway runs a number of different trains, each at a different speed, and priced accordingly. First-class sleepers usually accord an air-conditioned, two-bunk compartment with wash basin; second-class sleepers are bunks with curtains and with a ceiling fan or air-conditioning, depending on the ticket price. The fastest is the Special Express, which is the best choice for long-haul, overnight travel. These trains cut travel time by as much as 60% (though they are still slower than buses) and have sleeper cars—which are a must for really long trips. Rapid trains (in reality, rather slow) are the next best option. Prices vary for class, from air-conditioned sleeper cars in first class to air-conditioned and fan sleepers or seats in second, on down to the straight-backed, hard seats in third class.

Warning: On trains, pay close attention to your possessions. Thievery is common on overnight trips. Also make sure if you are traveling solo that you state your sex when booking. The ticket agents won't put two strangers of opposite sexes together in first class, so don't be baffled if you are told the class is "full" when in fact there are bunks. In that case, you may have to downgrade.

By Bus

Buses are the cheapest and fastest transportation to the farthest and most remote destinations in the country. However, the frequency with which wrecked buses appear on Thai news programs shows that taking the bus carries an inherent risk. If you go for it, the major choices are public or private and air-conditioned or non-air-conditioned. Longer bus trips usually depart in the evenings to arrive at their destination early in the morning. Whenever you can, opt for the **VIP buses,** especially for overnight trips. Some have 36 seats; better ones have 24 seats. The extra cost is well worth it for the legroom. Also, stick to government-subsidized buses operated by the **Transport Company** (✆ **02936-2841**) from each city's proper bus terminal. Many private companies sell VIP tickets for major routes, but sometimes put you on a standard bus. Ideally, buses are best for short excursions.

Longer-haul buses are an excellent value (usually less than 33B per hour of travel), but can be scary if you get a reckless driver.

Warning: When traveling by long-distance bus, do not accept drinks or snacks from fellow Thai travelers; they can be spiked. And watch your possessions closely: Thievery is common, particularly on overnight buses, when valuables are left in overhead racks.

By Taxi, Tuk-Tuk, Songtaew & Samlor

By law, **taxis** must charge by the meter, with a typical ride costing 100B to 200B. If you look outwardly like a tourist, a driver may try to scam you into paying a hefty fare by refusing to use the meter. Get out and find a new taxi if that happens; and avoid stationary taxis (usually parked next to expensive hotels), as these tend to be the scam artists. Note that if you're journeying to a remote part of town, a taxi driver may refuse you, especially when it's coming up to a shift change (3–4pm) or if the traffic is bad.

If you don't speak any Thai, you'll be lucky to find a **tuk-tuk** ride for less than 50B, even for the shortest hops. Be sure to bargain hard with these guys, and don't let 'em take you for a ride (in other words, on shopping trips or to massage parlors). In most provincial areas and resort islands, small pickup trucks called ***songtaews*** cruise the main streets offering communal taxi service at cheap, set fees. As with tuk-tuks, always remember to agree on your fare before engaging a driver.

The ***samlor*** (literally "three wheels") is a dying breed of pedal-powered transport—a bicycle taxi that is often referred to as a pedicab or trishaw; the rider pulls passengers along behind him in a covered seat, and this type of transport is most commonly seen laden with shopping from local markets. Some hotels organize sightseeing tours by *samlor,* but otherwise they are rarely used by visitors. Motorized three-wheel vehicles, such as tuk-tuks, are also sometimes called *samlors*.

Note: Few taxi, tuk-tuk, *songtaew,* or *samlor* drivers speak even basic English, so have a copy of your hotel's name, street address, and district written in Thai with you at all times.

A small tip is usually expected, though of course it is up to you. Because many taxi or tuk-tuk drivers claim to have no change, don't leave your hotel without some small bills.

4 MONEY & COSTS

CURRENCY

The Value of the Baht vs. Other Popular Currencies

Thai Baht	US$	Can$	UK£	Euro (€)	Aus$	NZ$
1	US$.03	C$.03	£.01	€.02	A$.03	NZ$.04

The Thai unit of currency is the **baht** (written B, Bt, Bht, or THB) and is divided into 100 **satang.** Tiny copper coins represent 25 and 50 satang; silver coins are 1B, 2B (rare), and 5B. The larger 10B coin is silver with a copper inset. Bank notes come in denominations of 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple), and 1,000B (brown).

Travel in Thailand is affordable and therefore attracts all types of travelers. In 2007, the average Thai income stood at around 8,400B per person, per month, so standards of living and corresponding

What Things Cost in Bangkok	Thai Baht
A taxi from Suvarnabhumi Airport to the city	250–300
Local call (pay phone) per minute	1
Double at the Oriental (very expensive)	15,000
Double at the Swiss Lodge (moderate)	3,800
Double at Bossotel (budget)	1,800
Dinner for one, without wine, at Sirocco (expensive)	1,000
Dinner for one, without wine, at Taling Pling (inexpensive)	150
Dinner for one, without wine, at a city food court (inexpensive)	100
Bottle of beer at a hotel bar	150
Bottle of beer at a local bar	80
Coca-Cola	25
Regular coffee at a mall cafe	100
Admission to the National Museum	200
Movie ticket	120

prices reflect this. Compared to home, many excellent hotels and restaurants cost a fraction of the price in Thailand, and, because of this, Thais consider any foreigner to be extremely well-off.

Always bear in mind that throughout Thailand, the baht will be the only acceptable currency, and foreign currency is rarely, if ever, accepted for everyday transactions.

There are no restrictions on the import of foreign currencies or traveler's checks, but you cannot export foreign currency in excess of 50,000B per person. Before the currency crisis in July 1997, one U.S. dollar could buy you 25 Thai baht. During the worst of the crisis, the value was 55B to the dollar. Though still prone to fluctuations, the exchange rate has recently steadied, and amounts listed throughout this book are calculated at **US$1 = 35B** and **£1 = 55B.** For the most up-to-date figures, see www.xe.com. The above box shows rough cross-values with major currencies.

Some travelers like to change a little money before leaving home, though it is not really necessary. You can sometimes buy Thai baht at your local American Express or Thomas Cook office or order baht at your bank; however, it is much easier to visit an airport exchange booth or ATM on arrival in Thailand. There are exchange kiosks at most international airport arrival halls in Thailand, which are generally open when flights arrive, but don't rely on them being open 24 hours.

Note: Though most prices in this guide are quoted in baht, some hotels quote their rates in U.S. dollars. Where that is the case, I provide $ rates in the listings.

ATMS

If you have an ATM or a credit card, these can be used in 24-hour cash machines that dispense money in 100-, 500-, and 1,000-baht bills. Thai ATMs accept most international bank card systems. **Cirrus** (✆ **800/424-7787;** www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (✆ **800/843-7587;** www.visa.com) networks span the kingdom. Look at the back of your bank card to see which network

you're on, and then call or check online for ATM locations in Thailand. Be sure you know your personal identification number (PIN) and daily withdrawal limit before you depart. You'll also need a 4-digit PIN in Thailand, so if yours is a 6-digit number, get it changed before you go.

The best banks to visit are **Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmer's Bank, Siam Commercial Bank,** and **Bank of Ayudhya,** as each has major branches in every city and many small towns. For specific locations of ATMs, see "Fast Facts" listings throughout this book.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS

In Thailand, traveler's checks are seen less nowadays, having been largely replaced by ATMs. Given the fees you'll pay for using an ATM overseas, though, you might be better off with traveler's checks, if you're withdrawing money often. In Thailand, traveler's checks are best exchanged in a main branch of city-center banks or in a five-star international hotel. They may be accepted in Bangkok at the small exchange counters, but not always. (The best rates are at banks.)

CREDIT CARDS

International hotels and larger businesses in Thailand accept major credit cards. Despite protest from credit card companies, many establishments, such as supermarkets and department stores, add a 3% to 5% surcharge for payment by credit card (this is above and beyond any fees levied by your credit card company). Be sure to ask before handing over your card, and keep all receipts. When using your card in Thai department stores, also be aware that each section must ring up its receipt *separately*—so don't be alarmed when a clerk walks off with your card to process the transaction.

MasterCard and **Visa** are the most widely accepted credit cards in Thailand, followed by **American Express.** Most hotels and restaurants accept all of these, especially in tourist destination areas. Discover and Diners Club are far less commonly accepted.

Never leave your cards with others for safekeeping (such as during a trek). If you don't want to carry them, put them in a hotel safe. There have been numerous reports of charges made while cards were left at guesthouses, or small shops running extra slips against a card. For tips and telephone numbers to call if your wallet is stolen or lost, go to "Lost & Found," in the "Fast Facts" chapter (p. 382).

5 HEALTH

STAYING HEALTHY

Thailand, like all third-world countries, poses a small risk to travelers. The same precautions for visiting tropical climes apply to the more remote areas of the Thai kingdom, where some types of mosquito can transmit malaria or dengue fever. Ask healthcare professionals to supply you with the *latest* information about health risks specific to the region as well as global pandemics such as the H1N1 virus (swine flu).

It is recommended that travelers have current immunizations for hepatitis A, polio, and tetanus. Young people are advised to get a rubella vaccine to protect against the TB virus; check that you are protected. Wounds can be aggravated by heat and humidity, so watch out for infections; wash cuts promptly with iodine or saline solution, and keep them dry.

Frommers.com: The Complete Travel Resource

Planning a trip or just returned? Head to **Frommers.com,** voted Best Travel Site by *PC Magazine.* We think you'll find our site indispensable before, during, and after your travels—with expert advice and tips; independent reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions, and preferred shopping and nightlife venues; vacation giveaways; and an online booking tool. We publish the complete contents of over 135 travel guides in our **Destinations** section, covering over 4,000 places worldwide. We've also added weekly **podcasts, interactive maps,** and hundreds of new images across the site.

GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE

Dispensaries and hospital facilities in Thailand, especially in urban centers, are generally excellent. In Phuket, hospitals are familiar with holidaymakers, especially victims of the island's many car and motorbike crashes. Smaller towns will usually have a basic clinic, but Bangkok is always the best bet. (See "Fast Facts," in individual destination chapters for info.)

COMMON AILMENTS

STOMACH TROUBLE Often the change in climate and diet will provoke **diarrhea** in travelers to Thailand. You can best avoid upset stomachs by sticking to bottled water at all times, and drinking lots of it. Also be sure canned or bottled drinks are unopened, and wash your hands regularly, especially before eating.

It's useful to keep good antidiarrhea medicine, such as Imodium, handy in your travel bag, plus a fruit-flavored electrolyte powder, such as Dechamp, to mix with water to prevent dehydration. ***Note:*** A roll of toilet paper or packet of tissues is a good idea too; Thai toilets do not always provide this. Pharmacies here, such as Boots or Watson's, have a wide range of Western brand drugs, including Imodium. 7-Eleven stores sell single toilet-paper rolls and ready-to-go electrolyte drinks, such as Gatorade, as well as the familiar items and brands such as Bayer, Tylenol, and Eno antacids.

While restaurant hygiene throughout the country is generally excellent, be wary of street food stalls in areas of heavy traffic where pollution might affect the cleanliness of ingredients. (See the "Overcoming a Fear of Food Stalls" box, on p. 31, for more info.) If you develop a condition that includes cramps and lasts more than 24 hours, find a doctor for possible antibiotic treatment.

TROPICAL ILLNESSES **Hepatitis A** can be avoided using the same precautions as for diarrhea. Most Asians are immune through exposure, but people from the West are very susceptible. Consider starting a course of vaccines at least 3 months before your trip.

Major tourist areas, such as Bangkok, Phuket, Ko Samui, and Chiang Mai, are generally **malaria free.** However, malaria is still a problem in rural parts, particularly territories in the mountains to the north and near the borders with Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. When you're traveling to remote areas, start taking a malarial prophylaxis well in advance (most dosages start 4 weeks before travel), such as **Malarone** (a combo of Atovaquone and Proguanil) or **Doxycycline**—but see a travel med specialist to confer, and have him or her advise you on the potentially harmful **side effects.** Note that **Mefloquine** (sold under

the name Larium) is no longer recommended for Thailand.

The best way to prevent malarial transmission or catching any other diseases listed here is to cover up with light-colored clothing, and wear long pants and sleeves after dark. Sleep with **Permethrin**-treated mosquito netting well tucked in, and use repellents. And make sure your repellent contains a high percentage of DEET. If you do get bitten, apply a dab of **calamine lotion** to ease the itching, and avoid scratching, which only makes it worse. If you develop a fever within 2 weeks of entering a high-risk area, be sure to consult a physician.

Dengue fever is now a major problem throughout Southeast Asia. Recent years have seen epidemics in the region. Similar to malaria, the virus is spread by a mosquito, but this one can bite during the day as well as at night. Symptoms are similar to those of the flu, with high fever, severe aches, fatigue, and possible skin rashes or headaches, lasting about a week. Drink plenty of water and seek medical attention immediately if you experience these symptoms.

Japanese encephalitis is a deadly viral infection that attacks the brain and is spread by a mosquito bite. Outbreaks have been known to occur in the region, so stay abreast of the most up-to-date CDC information. As for malaria and dengue, the best protection is to avoid being bitten, but seek medical attention if you develop symptoms such as fever, severe aches, and skin rashes.

BUGS & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS On jungle hikes in particular, wear long sleeves and trousers instead of shorts, which will protect against not just mosquito bites, but the ubiquitous ticks, leeches, nasty biting giant centipedes, and (rarely seen) snakes. In order to survive the heat and humidity, wear loose cotton pants, socks, and sturdy boots—natural fibers are perfect for this terrain. Always try to minimize the chance of getting cuts and scrapes (they can get infected 10 times faster than back home). When venturing into thick jungle terrain, do so with a qualified guide and follow his or her example. Don't pick or touch plants unless the guide says it's safe.

Rabies is a concern in Thailand, as are bites from any stray animals—infected or not. Temples house many mangy dogs because Buddhists believe their duty is to feed them. Such dogs are often members of a pack and can get aggressive toward strangers of any kind. Occasionally, a rabid animal makes its way into the mix. Stay clear of all stray animals; and seek medical attention immediately, if you've been bitten. If you find yourself cornered, look for a stick to keep these mutts at bay. Bangkok has a rabies and snakebite help desk at ✆ **02256-4214.**

Avoid **freshwater streams** or **lagoons,** as they can be contaminated by chemicals or parasites. Sadly, lack of environmental regulations means sewage outlet pipes often pour into the sea or freshwater streams. **Coral reefs** pose minor risks from such things as poisonous sea snakes, jellyfish, and sea urchins. You can alleviate Jellyfish burns simply by applying vinegar. In the case of any cuts or stings, try to clean with bottled water and apply an antimicrobial ointment or antihistamine, if you have an allergic response. If you catch an ear infection, ear drops are sold in pharmacies, or mild boric acid or vinegar solutions can help.

RESPIRATORY ILLNESS The air in Bangkok at certain times of the year can be smog-laden and is especially bad on sidewalks, next to busy roads, or under the BTS. Chiang Mai can also be very hazy in March. Anyone with respiratory issues such as asthma should carry both regular and emergency inhalers, though brands such as **Seretide, Bricanyl,** and **Ventolin**

are available without prescription. **SARS** and **H5N1 Flu (bird flu)** have caused problems here in the past; at present **H1N1 influenza,** or swine flu, is a growing problem. Check out the latest situation at **www.cdc.gov**.

COPING WITH THE HEAT The symptoms for **sunstroke** or **heat exhaustion** are unbearable headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, and extreme fatigue. Avoid these ailments by drinking mineral (*not* purified) water, electrolyte drinks, or soda water regularly, *but in small amounts,* to replace minerals and increase hydration. An aspirin or Tylenol can help lower body temperatures. Expose yourself gradually to the heat; wearing a high-SPF sunscreen and a hat will prevent sunburn but not heatstroke. Low alcohol consumption, light meals, and eating minimally spiced food will help you to acclimatize much faster.

Use talcum powder after showering to avoid incapacitating **heat rash,** and only use clean, dry towels to avoid pervasive fungal growths such as **tinea** or **candida.** Fast-acting antifungal powders, creams, or suppositories, such as **Canesten** (for tinea) and **Diflucan** (for yeast infections), are available in pharmacies without a prescription.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET SICK IN THAILAND

Medical services in Thailand are good in cities, and high street dispensaries—though unregulated—sell most drugs, even those normally available only by prescription overseas. The pharmacist may have an almanac on the counter in English, where you can check the different brand names of generic pharmaceutical products in your country, but always seek professional advice.

In most cases, your existing health plan should provide the coverage you need. But double-check; you may want to buy **travel medical insurance** instead. Bring your insurance ID card (for hospital visits only) with you when you travel.

If you don't feel well, consider asking any hotel concierge to recommend a local doctor or clinic. Typically, doctors see patients on a first-come, first-served basis, unless there is an emergency. You may have to fill in a form telling of allergies or existing conditions before you see a physician. In only very grave cases will you be sent to the emergency room. I list **emergency numbers** under "Fast Facts," p. 381.

You'll need to get a taxi to the hospital (*rohng pha yaa baan,* in Thai), as Thailand does not normally offer ambulance services. In an emergency, some embassies or consulates can offer basic advice.

6 SAFETY

Though violent crime is rare in Thailand, it is unfortunately on the rise. Fortunately, foreign visitors are not usually targeted unless they have seriously upset a local. Tourists are more likely to encounter con artists, but a few basic precautions can help avoid problems.

Because **pickpockets** and scam artists work the tourist areas and pounce on friendly or naive travelers, keep an eye on valuables in crowded places, and be wary of anyone who approaches you in the street to solicit your friendship. However genuine the entreaty sounds, you will end up wasting precious time on "shopping tours," where your "guide" will collect a commission and keep you from getting where you'd like to go (or worse).

In general, even in big cities, single men and women are fairly safe as long as they

stick to walking in brightly lit areas where there is plenty of activity. If, for whatever reason, you sense a confrontation developing, just walk away. The **tourist police hotline, ✆ 1155,** should bring a quick response but does not guarantee that the police will support the foreigner. Know you cannot win in any altercation: Every year a handful of gung-ho tourists injure themselves trying.

Thai police are some of the lowest-paid civil servants in the country, so it's not surprising that they have a reputation for harassment, intimidation, and bribery. Involving yourself in any way whatsoever (especially amorously) with a Thai cop is dangerous. There are many cases of lovelorn officers gunning down Thai and foreign girls (and/or their new boyfriends) who had previously flirted with their affections.

Thailand can offer illicit temptations that may seem harmless to naive travelers. Yet the Thai government has zero tolerance of drug trafficking and use. Many people who think they are being offered a casual puff on a joint don't realize they are being set up; every year a few will end up never leaving the kingdom, serving a life sentence in a Thai jail cell. Prostitution is also illegal; see the "Sex for Sale" box, below, for info on that.

DRIVING TIPS

Driving is another all-too-obvious danger here. Many drivers in the country have bought their licenses, and hence little attention is given to speed limits or other rules of the road. Driving a rental car here is not for the fainthearted; extreme caution should be taken and defensive driving skills are key. Every year Thai hospitals are full of banged, bruised, and mummy-wrapped travelers recovering from road accidents. For years, Thailand's annual road death statistics have defied belief, especially on the hilly islands of Phuket, Ko Samui, and Ko Chang, where a sense of exhilaration tempts drivers to their fates. Pedestrians in cities should be particularly wary of foot crossings operated by traffic lights, as many drivers ignore them completely.

If you do get in an accident, keep in mind that Thais don't normally have insurance. If they don't flee the scene, they might try to negotiate a settlement. Local officials may actually hinder the situation, especially if the culpable faction can persuade them you are to blame. If you find yourself in this situation, take photographs of the scene and ask to get a copy of the IDs of those involved.

POLITICAL ISSUES

Since the military coup d'état in September 2006, the political situation in Thailand has become quite unstable and there is ongoing unrest as red-shirted supporters of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), who would like to reinstate ex–Prime Minister Thaksin, rally against the yellow-shirted supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Several clashes have occurred around Bangkok's Sanam Luang district and in front of Parliament House. The current prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has promised to call a general election soon, but the current political climate suggests that campaigning will produce some ugly scenes. Steer well clear of any large groups, particularly if they are wearing red or yellow shirts.

If there is a hint of trouble, many shops will close; in extreme cases (such as the 2006 coup), local TV stations shut down. Stay off the streets and watch overseas satellite news for the latest developments, but do not be tempted to be part of history by joining the protests. If you remain indoors, it's unlikely you'll be caught up in any violence.

Sex for Sale

Prostitution in Thailand is illegal, and yet every day you will see foreigners picking up Thai hookers of both sexes. Selling sex is not so much tolerated as politely ignored. However, some travelers regard it as a tourist draw, especially when underage boys or girls are involved. These days, the international police are hard on their heels; high-profile arrests are now not just common, but actively sought.

It is hard to get exact numbers for Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) in Thailand; the number fluctuates from 80,000 to 800,000, depending on the source. Due to the huge numbers involved and the dangers therein, Thailand has made significant steps to counter the spread of HIV/AIDS. Through education and the introduction of condoms, it has made efforts to stem the tide of new cases (though statistics are unreliable). A leading force in this effort is the **Population & Community Development Association (PCDA**), led by the courageous and innovative public health crusader Senator Mechai Viravaidya.

The PCDA has enlarged the scope of its rural development programs from family planning and networks distributing condoms to running seminars for CSWs. In poor, uneducated, rural families, where sons provide farm labor, the sex trade has become an income-earning occupation for parents, who sell their daughters to urban criminal gangs, often saying they will "go to a good job." They don't. They end up as sex slaves. Under international statutes, many are still minors; having sexual relations with them is equivalent to rape. It is a sorely misplaced myth to believe that CSWs live a good life of fun and freedom. Addiction to drugs and alcohol or physical abuse is commonplace. Rape is even more frequent. Girls contract STDs or fall pregnant, and scores of unwanted children—many with HIV—are dumped on orphanages.

Poor regulations and scheming between gangs and police do nothing to stop this. Though legislation coyly prohibits full nudity in most go-go bars, it just means the illegal backroom deals, kidnappings, rape, and the enslavement of children carry on behind closed doors, funded by the profits paid by the brothels' ignorant clientele.

If you choose to support prostitution, you are not only breaking the law, but also supporting the trafficking and abuse of women and men, including minors. You are putting your own life at risk from STDs and perpetuating a trade that ruins lives. It's not all one-sided play either: Numerous cases are known where tourists have been drugged in their hotel rooms by their sleeping partner. If they are lucky, they awake 2 days later to find all their valuables gone. There are a shocking number of stories about Western travelers found dead after a liaison with a CSW, but rarely will the newspapers report the full details.

Exercise caution in your dealings with any stranger. If, in spite of all these warnings, you decide to use the services of Thailand's CSWs, take proper precautions; carry condoms at all times, and check the person's ID. If you are in any doubt, walk away—it could save your life.

The far southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, near the Malaysian border, have seen increased sectarian violence between Thai Muslims and Thai military police. Thai institutions, schools, banks, and Buddhist temples have been targeted with small-scale bombs. The Thai government has come under international scrutiny for the brutal force used to quell uprisings. Avoid this area, or travel through it with care.

DEALING WITH DISCRIMINATION

There is still a certain amount of institutionalized racism in old Siam, and much pride is taken from the fact that no foreign power colonized the kingdom. Thai people are, superficially at least, tolerant, but not always accepting of Western ways. Foreign men with young Thai girlfriends can be viewed with deep distrust, and even distaste.

Thais follow a codified hierarchy, with wealth and status going hand in hand. Therefore, the richer Thai-Chinese, who own and operate big businesses, top the scale, and people from Isan, the impoverished northeast of the kingdom, come way down in the ratings. Associating yourself with any Thai will, very often, put you at their level.

Caucasians are known as *farang* (a word that originally meant French, referring to the nation's earliest Western visitors). *Farang* is not necessarily a racist term, but, yes, foreign tourists are ritually overcharged and some take this personally as a form of discrimination. Look at this from a Thai, not Western, perspective. Thais believe if you have more, you are expected to give more; the rule applies to Thais as well, regardless of your budget. As a *farang* you are *automatically* seen as wealthy in Thailand. Skills in bargaining will come in time, if you practice. Just remember that Thais really appreciate generosity, rather than someone who makes a big deal about haggling over a baht or two.

7 SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling, but sadly Thailand does not make it easy on the severely physically challenged. Visitors to Thailand will find that, short of the better hotels in the larger towns, amenities for travelers with disabilities are nonexistent, even in public places. Negotiating sidewalks in cities is hazardous even for the nimble-footed, and crossing roads is a nightmare, so itineraries need to be well-planned.

On the positive side, the Thais' warmhearted and genuinely helpful nature means they go to great pains to make sure visitors are well looked after, and they will often find simple solutions to worrying problems. One way to guarantee a smooth trip if you have mobility problems is to sign up for a package tour with **Help & Care Travel Company** (✆ **02720-5395;** www.wheelchairtours.com), in Bangkok.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Thailand is famous for its seemingly gay-friendly attitudes, but homophobia certainly does exist. Lesbians are known as *tom dee;* they have their own hangouts and are usually less vocal and ostentatious than their male counterparts, or the theatrically inclined lady-boys *(katoeys).*

There are occasional Gay Pride–style events, as well as regular cabaret shows and beauty competitions for lady-boys,

throughout the country. The same kind of nightlife that caters to heterosexual males is offered in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Phuket's Patong Beach. Venues range from gay bars and dance clubs, men-only saunas (bathhouses), and "pay at the door" parties. In Bangkok, the most popular male-only joint is the opulent Babylon men's club, off Sathorn Road. Check **www.utopia-asia.com,** for gay-friendly information and plenty of travel tips for Thailand.

SENIOR TRAVELERS

Senior citizens are highly revered in Thai society and are treated with deference and respect, which comes as a pleasant surprise to many first-time Western visitors. Unfortunately, this deference does not stretch to offering the kind of discounts on transport and admission fees that you might be used to back home. There are exceptions, however, and it's always worth asking politely if there are preferable rates for senior citizens, as Thais take pride in accommodating their guests' wishes.

FAMILY TRAVELERS

A visit to Thailand will certainly broaden the horizons of young visitors, and many families report great experiences in the kingdom, partly because most Thais dote on kids. Larger resorts and hotels have kid-friendly programs, kids' clubs, connecting rooms, sports equipment rentals, and kid-oriented group activities. Many of the larger hotels also offer special deals for families or young children. To locate accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that are particularly kid-friendly, refer to the "Kids" icons throughout this guide.

Some hotels allow kids under 12 to share their parents' room for free, especially if it has two double beds, but an extra bed can always be found at a small extra cost. There's not much point in looking for accommodation that includes kitchen facilities, as restaurants are generally inexpensive, but while the spiciness of Thai food appeals to most adults, you'll have to watch out for junior digging into a Thai salad laced with fiery chilies.

As in other countries, babysitting services are available in top hotels, but few consider this a chore in Thailand, and generally you can expect hotel and restaurant staff to be falling over each other to amuse the kids while you are eating or enjoying a snooze by the pool.

As to where to go for a family holiday, kids are as enthralled by tropical beaches and mountain landscapes as adults. Wildlife watching somewhere like Khao Yai National Park is a good idea, but you may want to give the ancient cities of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai a miss, as kids are likely to find the ruins a big bore.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women travelers face no particular discrimination or dangers in Thailand. Women should, however, be very careful when dealing with monks: Never touch a monk, never hand anything directly to them (it should be set on the floor in front of the monk or given to a man who will hand it to them directly), and don't sit next to monks on public transport or in the monk-only designated areas in waiting rooms. Some parts of temples do not allow women to enter; look for signs indicating this.

Thais are extremely modest, almost prudish, and though Thai bar girls dress in scanty fashions, that's not recommended, if you want respect. Women should avoid tank tops and short-shorts (the equivalent of wearing nightwear outdoors for Westerners, though strangely for Thais there is no taboo about this). Going topless on beaches is illegal in many areas and considered a public obscenity. At all temples and mosques, be sure to wear a long skirt or trousers and have your shoulders covered.

Your head should be covered in mosques, but headwear (caps, sun visors) must be removed in Buddhist temples.

When dressing for a night out, be very careful that you do not give the wrong message to Thai men. Wearing clothes that Thais would deem immodest (short skirts, low-cut shirts exposing cleavage, or bra tops) is regarded as a come-on.

STUDENT TRAVELERS

Discounts for students in Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia are better earned by the tenacity of the individual traveler's bargaining skills and tolerance for substandard accommodation rather than flashing a student ID—though showing one does help when buying mass transit tickets in Bangkok. The **International Student Identity Card (ISIC),** however, offers substantial savings on plane tickets and some entrance fees. It also provides you with basic health and life insurance and a 24-hour help line. The card is available for $14 from **STA Travel** (✆ **800/781-4040** in North America; www.sta.com or www.statravel.com), the biggest student travel agency in the world.

If you're no longer a student but are still under 26, you can get an **International Youth Travel Card (IYTC)** for the same price from the same people, entitling you to some discounts (but not on museum admissions). **Travel CUTS** (✆ **800/592-2887;** www.travelcuts.com) offers similar services for both Canadians and U.S. residents. Irish students may prefer to turn to **USIT** (✆ **01/602-1906;** www.usit.ie), an Ireland-based specialist in student, youth, and independent travel.

SINGLE TRAVELERS

Solo journeys in Thailand offer infinite opportunities to make friends and meet locals, and it's easy to change your plans without upsetting others. However, solo travelers are something of an oddity here. Thais love asking foreign visitors, "Are you married?" They themselves commonly marry quite young and start families early, so many assume single travelers to be sad or lonely. Be ready to be offered sympathy, if you're traveling alone, and don't take it personally. Show them photos of family and friends so they can see you're not alone in the world. Also be prepared to be pestered sometimes; Thais don't share Western notions of privacy, so they never think of "giving someone space."

As for expenses, some hotels offer discounts for singles. If, however, you like resorts, tours, or cruises, you're likely to get hit with paying a per-room rate regardless. Single travelers can avoid these supplements, of course, by agreeing to room with other single travelers on the trip. Another way to reduce costs is to find a compatible roommate before you go, from one of the many roommate locator agencies.

8 SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Unfortunately, Thailand is way behind much of the world in general eco-awareness; conflicts between economic and ecological interests generally work out in favor of the former. Environmental problems include deforestation, air and water pollution, flooding, habitat loss, and consequent species loss. Among the 33 mammals in danger of extinction in Thailand are tigers, leopards, and elephants. The last of these is a particular shame, as it was once revered (and still is in some quarters) as a creature of great spiritual significance; the few thousand that remain spend their time either entertaining tourists at elephant camps or searching for food in a shrinking forest.

General Resources for Green Travel

In addition to the resources for Thailand listed above, the following websites provide valuable wide-ranging information on sustainable travel. For a list of even more sustainable resources, as well as tips and explanations on how to travel greener, visit www.frommers.com/planning.

Responsible Travel (www.responsibletravel.com) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas; the site is run by a spokesperson for ethical tourism in the travel industry. **Sustainable Travel International** (www.sustainabletravelinternational.org) promotes ethical tourism practices, and manages an extensive directory of sustainable properties and tour operators around the world.

Carbonfund (www.carbonfund.org), **TerraPass** (www.terrapass.org), and **Carbon Neutral** (www.carbonneutral.org) provide info on "carbon offsetting," or offsetting the greenhouse gas emitted during flights.

For information on animal-friendly issues throughout the world, visit **Tread Lightly** (www.treadlightly.org).

Volunteer International (www.volunteerinternational.org) has a list of questions to help you determine the intentions and the nature of a volunteer program. For general info on volunteer travel, visit **www.volunteerabroad.org** and **www.idealist.org**.

Fortunately, several nongovernment organizations (NGOs), such as the World Wildlife Fund, have an active presence in the country, attempting to draw attention to the most serious problems. Thai authorities are also finally taking tiny steps to preserve the nature and wildlife of its many different ecological zones, from swamp jungles in the south, to mountain forests in the north, to the many marine parks in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.

As the world's leading exporter of rice, Thailand is at the forefront of research into new strains of the crop that are both more nutritious and less harmful in terms of use of pesticides. More and more restaurants are serving brown rice as well as white rice. Also, look out for **Doi Kham** brand fruits, vegetables, juices, and preserves (on sale in many airports). These are products of the King's royal projects, which provide work for rural people while following organic farming principles.

Recycling in Thailand still refers to folks who go around buying up old papers, cans, and bottles, which they then sell for a pittance. Nowhere is trash separated at source before disposal. Your hotel may be your best bet for finding a place to deposit recyclable waste, especially if you choose a hotel that has instituted sustainable practices.

Visitors who choose to spend their time cycling, trekking, or kayaking in the kingdom inevitably have less detrimental impact on the country than those who breeze around in tour buses churning out carbon dioxide. However, choosing a responsible tour operator is not easy, as just about all of them these days use the buzzword "eco-tourism" in their sales pitches. Ask them exactly what they are doing to reduce their carbon footprint and to benefit the local community in the areas that their tours visit. For a list of local green operators, contact the **Thai Ecotourism and Adventure Travel Association** (✆ **02642-5465;** www.teata.or.th).

Some hotel groups, such as the **Banyan Tree** resorts in Bangkok and Phuket, have made huge efforts over the past decade to implement sustainable projects, including a pledge to reduce their carbon footprint in all their resorts by 10% each year. To see a list of green hotels, contact the **Green Leaf Foundation** (✆ **02652-8321-2;** www.greenleafthai.org).

When booking hotels, particularly on the beach, consider carefully whether you really need a room with air-conditioning and other power-draining equipment such as fridges, TVs, and DVD players. These days many eco-friendly, luxury resorts do not offer air-conditioning; instead, they provide well-designed, wooden bungalows with balconies that attract a delicious breeze, allowing you to appreciate your surroundings more than in an enclosed room, and mosquito nets over the beds can save you from nighttime discomfort. You can also sleep more soundly knowing your stay is making minimal impact on the environment.

In more than 110 national parks, visitors can see the local wildlife species in residence, as well as appreciate the delicate balance of each habitat. The more popular parks have clearly displayed interpretation facilities at their visitor centers, as well as trails with bridges and catwalks, and markers explaining the important elements of the environment and its inhabitants. They also provide log-cabin-style bungalow accommodations, plus tents and supplies for campers. Get in touch with the **Department of National Parks** at ✆ **02561-0777,** or visit their website (www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve/nationalpark.asp), where you can find information about the parks and also make online reservations.

For information on volunteering in Thailand, see p. 55.

9 SPECIAL-INTEREST TRIPS & ESCORTED GENERAL-INTEREST TOURS

ADVENTURE & WELLNESS TRAVEL

While for some, the ideal holiday is spent lolling on a beach sipping smoothies or cocktails, others want to push themselves to the limit, seeking thrills and adventure. Fortunately, Thailand's well-developed tourism industry offers lots of adventurous options for the more intrepid traveler. Adventure-tour operators have opened up nature's wild side to those who would dare, providing exciting experiences that are well planned and safe for everyone, from beginners to experts. The following section will give you an overview of the many options, but for planning details refer to the specific destination chapters throughout this book.

The first thing many people consider for an active vacation is **scuba diving** or **snorkeling.** Living coral reefs grace the waters of the Andaman Sea, off Thailand's southwest coast and the Gulf of Thailand. More than 80 species of coral have been discovered in the Gulf, while the deeper and more saline Andaman has more than 210. Marine life includes hundreds of species of fish, plus numerous varieties of crustaceans and sea turtles. With the aid of scuba gear, divers can get an up-close-and-personal view of this undersea universe. For those without certification, many reefs close to the surface are still vibrant.

From Phuket (see chapter 10), you can take a day trip that includes two or three dives. **Long-term scuba trips** on live-aboard boats run seasonally. For more information on diving, see chapter 9, "Southern Peninsula: The East Coast & Islands," and chapter 10, "Southern

Peninsula: The West Coast & Islands," where many operators who schedule frequent trips are listed. Always check that an operator has PADI-certified dive masters, and that their boats are carrying the full bevy of certificates of approval issued by **international marine safety organizations.** Scuba training and certification packages are common and can have you ready to dive in 5 days. Pretty much every beach has independent operators or guesthouses that rent snorkels, masks, and fins for the day. A few boat operators take snorkelers to reefs off neighboring islands, especially from Ko Lanta, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi, Ko Samui, and Pattaya.

Thailand's mountainous jungle terrain in the north has become a haven for **trekkers.** At the same time, human rights organizations have highlighted the damage this does to sustainability in remote villages inhabited by poor hill-tribes, where the places visited have become little more than paying human zoos.

Choose your operator carefully and look out for community-based projects, where the local people reap real benefits from your visit. Treks can last 1 to 5 nights but usually involve no more than 3 to 4 hours per day of walking on jungle paths. All tours provide local guides to accompany groups, and the guides will keep the pace steady but comfortable for all trekkers involved. Some trips break up the monotonous walking with treks on elephant-back, trips in four-wheel-drive jeeps, or light rafting on flat bamboo rafts. Chiang Mai (see chapter 13) has the most trekking firms, while Chiang Rai, Pai, and Mae Hong Son (see chapter 14, "Touring the Northern Hills") also have their share of trekking companies. Recommended trekking operators are **Trekking Collective** (✆ **05320-8340;** www.trekkingcollective.com) and **Active Travel** (✆ **05320-4664-5;** www.activethailand.com).

River rafting in rubber dinghies and kayaks is becoming increasingly popular in Thailand, with operators taking off in places such as Pai (see chapter 14). Winding through dense jungles, past rock formations and local villages, these trips include camping and sometimes trekking. Rapids are rarely extreme but are big enough to be loads of fun, and safety measures are taken seriously.

A few lucky folks know that Thailand is home to one of the top-10 climbing walls in the world. **Rock climbing** at Railay Beach, in Krabi (see chapter 10), is attracting lovers of the sport, who come to have a go at these challenging cliffs. The views from the cliffs are breathtaking. A few small outfits accept beginners for training or will organize climbs for more specialized experts, providing all the necessary equipment.

If the wild isn't calling you, know that Thailand is Southeast Asia's top **spa and wellness** destination, with a bewildering variety of programs, varying from posh beach resorts, such as the **Chiva-Som** (p. 178), in Hua Hin, to low-key centers, such as the chain of colonic centers known as **The Spa** (p. 172). Health programs at these centers may include yoga, tai chi, massage, fasting, and alternative therapies.

ACADEMIC COURSES

It may seem strange to go on vacation in order to study, but when the subject is Thai cuisine, Thai massage, Buddhist meditation, or handling elephants, that's not so. Visitors get to appreciate these aspects of Thai culture so much more, as well as go home with new skills they can show off to their friends.

Cookery courses have been all the rage in Thailand for a decade now, with flexible courses that allow students to choose anything between half a day and a full week getting to grips with the subtleties of Thai

cuisine. Try a 1-day course to start, which usually involves taking a trip to the local fresh market to buy ingredients, then following the teacher's steps to produce a few Thai classics, such as *kaeng khiaw waan* (sweet green curry), *thawt man kung* (shrimp cakes) or *yam hua phli* (banana-flower salad). Then, if you enjoy homework, which involves eating what you've cooked, sign up for another day. Bangkok (p. 133) and Chiang Mai (p. 331) have the widest choice of schools, but many small towns now also have a cooking school.

Massage courses are also hugely popular among Westerners who appreciate the multiple benefits of a thorough, pressure-point massage and want to induce a deep relaxation in others. Once again, courses are flexible, ranging from a few days to several weeks, with 10 days being an average. Though you can get a good traditional massage anywhere in the country, few schools outside Bangkok and Chiang Mai have courses for foreigners. To study in style, head for **Chiva-Som** (p. 134) on Sukhumvit Soi 63, which runs an academy with a huge range of wellness techniques taught in English by trained therapists. See **www.chivasomacademy.com** for info.

Meditation courses present perhaps the ultimate challenge to fast-living Westerners who couldn't get through a day without their cellphone or TV. The challenge also involves no reading, no idle gossip (in some monasteries, no talking at all), and, toughest of all, no thinking. Most temples teach the Theravada Buddhist tradition of meditation and developing insight, known as Vipassana. The best-suited temples for foreigners are **Suan Mokkh** (p. 189) or **Wat Khao Tham** (p. 214), in the south; **Wat Rampoeng** (p. 331), in Chiang Mai; and **Wat Mahathat,** or The House of Dhamma (p. 135), in Bangkok.

Finally, if you've ever dreamed of being an **elephant handler,** or *mahout,* Thailand is the place for you—you can work with elephants at a number of places here. One of the best places is the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** at Lampang (✆ **05424-7875**), where you can train to be an elephant mahout and learn how to hop on and steer your very own 2-ton elephant. You'll get to know the language of the elephants (a mix of Thai and Karen words), and you'll also be called upon to feed and wash them. See p. 333, for more info.

VOLUNTOURISM

If you really want to commit yourself to giving as well as getting during your vacation, then consider signing up for volunteer work. What's more, people who experience the country in this way are guaranteed closer contact with Thais than those on the tourist circuit. The most common opportunities in Thailand involve teaching English, but computer skills and any other expertise might be employed to good effect. Below are some organizations that offer the chance to do voluntary work in Thailand; most require a donation to cover expenses such as accommodation and food.

If you know how to dot your Is and cross your Ts, you might have what it takes to be an English teacher. Contact **Lemon Grass Volunteering,** in Bangkok (✆ **081977-5300;** www.lemongrass-volunteering.com), or **Travel to Teach** (www.travel-to-teach.org/thai), an international organization with some teaching projects in the kingdom, for more information.

Mundo Exchange Thailand (www.thai-experience.org), with a base in Nong Khai in Thailand's remote northeast, has requirements for English teachers and people with computer skills, but will try to place anyone with a sincere desire to help the underprivileged.

Several organizations welcome volunteers at elephant camps that look after sick and mistreated elephants, including the **Elephant Nature Foundation** (✆ **05327-2855;** www.elephantnaturefoundation.com), which is based in the north of the country.

There are also organizations trying to protect gibbons from exploitation and extinction, such as the **Gibbon Rehabilitation Project,** on Phuket (see "Back to Nature," on p. 254).

Those seriously interested in marine conservation can join the volunteer team at Ko Phra Thong near Phuket, where an Italian-led organization called **Naucrates** (see "Nai Thon & Nai Yang Beaches," on p. 244) has spent over a decade educating local communities on ecological issues and monitoring the decline of local turtles. It also runs a mangrove revitalization scheme.

ESCORTED GENERAL-INTEREST TOURS

Escorted tours are structured group tours with a group leader. The price usually includes everything from airfare to hotels, meals, tours, admission costs, and local transportation. Here are some of the best operators for Thailand.

- **Absolute Asia** (15 Watts St., Fifth Floor, New York, NY 10013; ✆ **800/736-8187;** fax 212/627-4090; www.absoluteasia.com): Founded in 1989, Absolute Asia offers an array of innovative itineraries, specializing in individual or small group tours customized to your interests, with experienced local guides and excellent accommodations. Talk to them about tours that feature art, cuisine, religion, antiques, photography, wildlife study, archaeology, and soft adventure—they can plan a specialized trip to see just about anything you can dream up for any length of time.
- **Asia Transpacific Journeys** (2995 Center Green Court, Boulder, CO 80301; ✆ **800/642-2742** or 303/443-6789; fax 303/443-7078; www.southeastasia.com or www.asiatranspacific.com): Coordinating tours to every corner of South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Asia Transpacific Journeys deals with small groups and custom programs that include luxury hotel accommodations. They have specific tours for Thailand, such as the Best of Thailand, a 14-day trip that takes in Bangkok, the north, and the southern beaches. Asia Transpacific tours are fun, promote cultural understanding and sustainable tourism, and are highly recommended.
- **Diethelm** (Kian Gwan Building II, 12th Floor, 140/1 Wireless Rd., Bangkok 10330, Thailand; ✆ **02660-7000;** fax 02660-7020; www.diethelmtravel.com): The folks at this Swiss-based tour company, with offices throughout the region, are friendly and helpful, and a popular choice for European tour groups. Diethelm has full tour programs and can provide details for travelers in-country, arrange car rental or vans for small groups, and offer discount options to all destinations.
- **Intrepid** (Box 2781, Fitzroy, DC VIC 3065, Victoria, Australia; ✆ **1300/364-512,** or 800/970-7299 in the U.S., fax 613/9419-4426; www.intrepidtravel.com): This popular Australian operator is a reliable choice to get off the beaten path on a tour of Asia. Intrepid caters tours for the culturally discerning, those with humanitarian goals, and adventure travelers on a budget looking for a group-oriented tour of off-the-map locations. They live up to their name, and with some of the best guides in Asia, these folks will take you to the back of beyond safely and in style.

10 STAYING CONNECTED

TELEPHONE TIPS

Major hotels in Thailand feature convenient but pricey International Direct Dial (IDD), long-distance service, and fax services. They add a hefty surcharge to local and long-distance calls, which can add up to 50% in some cases. Note that 800 numbers, credit card numbers, or collect calls may not be readily available from your hotel phone; or if they are, a big fat service fee may be added to your bill. Check first.

Most post offices have special offices or booths for **overseas calls,** as well as **fax** and **telex service;** they're usually open Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm, though those in big cities may stay open later. There are also **overseas telegraph and telephone offices** (also called OCO, or overseas call office) open daily 24 hours throughout the country for long-distance international calls and telex and fax service. In addition, many Internet cafes, guesthouses, and travel agents offer long-distance calls using very affordable net-to-phone connections of varying quality.

Local calls can be made from any red or blue public pay telephone. Local calls cost 1B for 3 minutes; add more coins when the beeps sound. Blue public phones are for local and long-distance calls within Thailand.

Yellow TOT cards are sold in denominations of 100B, 300B, and 500B and are specific for domestic or international phones, which are clearly marked as such. **Hatari PhoneNet** offers a variety of phone cards that are a great value and are available at convenience stores everywhere. All cards can also be purchased at **Telephone Organization of Thailand** (TOT) offices.

To call Thailand: If you're calling Thailand from the United States:

1. Dial the international access code: 011.
2. Dial the country code: 66.
3. Dial the number. So the whole number you'd dial for Bangkok would be 011-66-2-000-0000.

Important Note: When making calls to Thailand, be sure to omit the "0" that appears before all phone numbers in this guide (thus you will dial only eight digits after the "66" country code). When calling within Thailand, you will need to add the two- or three-digit area code for the place you are calling, unless the number is a special four-digit hot line for an airline or tourist organization.

To make international calls: There are two ways to make international calls from Thailand—first, by IDD, for which the access number is 001; second, by Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), for which access numbers are 007, 008, and 009. The latter are much cheaper. After dialing the international access number, dial the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Next, you dial the area code and number. For example, if you wanted to call the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., you would dial 001-1-202-588-7800.

For directory assistance: Dial ✆ **1133,** or dial any hotel concierge or operator (even if you are not a guest, they can help).

Note: In smaller towns throughout this guide, I've left out phone numbers for bars/clubs that don't have permanent phone lines.

CELLPHONES

Note that cellphones are referred to as "mobiles" or "handsets" in Thailand, which operates on the GSM system. If you have an unlocked phone, you can install a

Online Traveler's Toolbox

Following is a selection of handy online tools to bookmark and use for your trip to Thailand.

- The official **Thai government** website (www.thaigov.go.th/eng) has info in English on current happenings in the kingdom.
- For **transportation information,** try the following sites: **Thai Airways International** (www.thaiair.com), **Bangkok Airways** (www.bangkokair.com), **Nok Air** (www.nokair.com), **SGA** (www.sga.co.th), **One-Two-GO** (www.fly12go.com), and Phuket's amphibious plane service, **Destination Air** (www.destinationair.com). Out of the Southeast Asian hubs, there's the extensive **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) and the smaller **Tiger Airways** (www.tigerairways.com), with newcomer **Jetstar** (www.jetstar.com) linking Asian cities with Australia. For train info, contact the **Thai State Railway** at www.railway.co.th/english/index.asp. ***Note:*** The official Suvarnabhumi or Don Muang Airport websites are not updated regularly and could be misleading to travelers. Cross-check these sites with more reliable international travel sites or blogs.
- **Thai publications** in English are numerous. ***Bangkok Post*** (www.bangkokpost.com) and ***The Nation*** (www.nationmultimedia.com) are the only English-language dailies. The free ***Where Magazine*** lists lots of events and happenings, as does ***BK Magazine,*** which has a younger target audience.
- There are a few **blogs** and info sites on Thailand with (not always updated) info about upcoming events in the Bangkok area and tips on life in Thailand. Check the likes of **www.bangkokrecorder.com** and **www.angloinfo.com**. New Zealand writer Stickman (**www.stickmanbangkok.com**) posts a useful but cautionary "warts and all" guide to Thailand, though some info is way out of date.

local, prepaid **SIM card** (sold at 7-Elevens and cellphone stores in Thailand). Show your phone to the salesperson; not all phones work on all networks. You'll get a local phone number—and much, much lower calling rates than using international roaming. Unlocking an already locked phone can be complicated, but it can be done; just call your cellular operator and say you'll be going abroad for several months and want to use the phone with a local provider. In Thailand, head to **Mah Boon Krong** (**MBK**), near the National Stadium BTS in central Bangkok, for assistance with unlocking cellphones at any cellphone vendor.

For trips of more than a few weeks spent in one country, buying a local SIM card becomes economically attractive, as Thailand has a number of cheap prepaid phone systems operated by **One-2-Call, True Move,** and **DTAC.** For around 800B, you will be given a starter pack, which includes a SIM card, an instant Thai mobile phone number, plus some free calls. Call costs depend on the package

you choose; some systems offer free off-peak messaging (SMS). With most plans, though, incoming calls are free.

INTERNET & EMAIL

Travelers have any number of ways to check their e-mail and access the Internet on the road in Thailand. These days, smart phones, Wi-Fi-enabled laptops, PDAs (personal digital assistants), or electronic organizers allow travelers to stay in touch almost anywhere. But bear in mind there's a very real risk while traveling in poor countries that any luxury electronic items, including the trendier mobile phone models (unaffordable to poorer Thais) may get stolen. If staying wired isn't a major part of your holiday, it's better to leave the hardware at home and check e-mail at cybercafes, which are easy to find.

Without Your Own Computer

Thailand's Internet cafes stay open late, they're affordable, and you'll pretty much find them everywhere. Bangkok's Sukhumvit, Surawong, or Khao San roads and the country's main beach destinations are all chockablock with Internet cafes. Many hotels have business centers that also offer Internet access, but they are much pricier.

Cybercafes charge around 30B to 80B per hour and most city connections now use high-speed lines (ADSL) and offer cheap overseas Internet calls on systems such as www.skype.com. Outside of the cities, look out for local cybercafes (usually full of school kids playing online shoot-'em-up games); most offer acceptable service.

With Your Own Computer

More and more hotels, cafes, and retailers in Thailand offer free high-speed Wi-Fi access (or charge a small fee for usage). You'll find wireless services at Starbucks branches—or look out for signs marked with the Thai brand TRUE, in malls such as Siam Paragon and CentralWorld. Most luxury hotels here do not offer Wi-Fi service free of charge; even if you are a guest, you will have to buy a prepaid access card from around 400B per hour. Some hotel executive lounges may include this service in the room rate. Contact your hotel in advance to see what your options are.

Major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have **local access numbers** around the world, allowing you to go online by placing a local call. Check your ISP's website, or call its toll-free number to find out more. Thailand has its own popular ISPs, the biggest of which is **CS Loxinfo,** which offers dial-up and ADSL. You can buy handy prepaid cards at 7-Elevens.

11 TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

The most visited parts of the country (meaning Bangkok, Phuket, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and Ko Samui) offer the widest choice of accommodation. International chains, such as the Mandarin Oriental group, The Peninsula, Hilton, Accor, Sheraton, and Marriott, have some of their finest hotels and resorts in these areas, while the Asian-based Dusit and Amari chains have numerous resort and city properties that can compete with the best.

Five-star hotels and resorts spare no detail for the business or leisure traveler, providing designer toiletries, plush robes, in-room DVD or CD players, Jacuzzis, and Wi-Fi, plus many other creature comforts. At the other end of the scale, Thailand is famous for its good-value

guesthouses; while they may lack fancy facilities, they do offer a friendly welcome and a comfy bed at rock-bottom prices. All expensive and some moderately priced hotels add a 10% service charge, plus 7% value-added tax (VAT), which can obviously make quite a difference, so check whether your chosen hotel adds them on. Air-conditioning is standard in most top-end and midrange hotels, while fans are the norm in most guesthouses. In some cases, such as in the north from November to February, A/C is not a necessity.

Accommodation categories in this guide are calculated according to rack rates in high season, though keep in mind that prices may fall as much as 50% between March and October, especially on the beach. Categories also refer to the majority of rooms, so if a hotel has a few rooms for 9,800B but most are over 10,000B, it will fall into the "very expensive" category.

PRICE RANGES

Because they have more facilities, better activity options and services, and well-trained staff, luxury category hotels and resorts can charge more than 10,000B a night for a double room. These are listed as **very expensive,** and many hotels in this category have started quoting prices in U.S. dollars.

Most hotels that fall into the **expensive** category (5,000B–9,999B) also have lots of bells and whistles, and they may still offer such perks as silk bathrobes, CD players, and DVD players, but feature less deluxe amenities. Room design and furnishings will not extend to the glamour of the higher categories, but all rooms will be well maintained and facilities tend to be of excellent quality.

Moderate hotels and resorts (2,000B–4,999B) are often quite modern and a good value for your money. Most have swimming pools, good restaurants, toiletries, satellite television, in-room safes, and international direct dialing from your room. Small, personalized, boutique hotels, which are currently very much in vogue, fall into this category. One reason for their popularity is that they generally have more character than large, impersonal hotels.

Thailand offers a good range of **inexpensive** places (less than 2,000B) for the budget traveler. The many mom-and-pop guesthouses and cut-price hostels often allow for more authentic experiences. If you go really inexpensive (under 300B), expect to rough it. Cold-water showers, fan-cooled rooms, and dormitories are the norm. But sometimes, for 500B to 1,000B, you'll find accommodation that stands out from the pack—quaint beachside bungalow villages, city hotels with good locations, or small guesthouses with knowledgeable and helpful staff.

Warning: The thought of a owning a holiday home in Thailand can be seductive, and private villas and timeshare properties are booming in places such as Ko Samui and Phuket. While many travelers fall for the sweet talk and buy right away, it pays to consult a reputable foreign law firm first. Many foreigners have lost their life savings in Thai real estate scams.

4

Suggested Itineraries in Thailand

Thailand has something for everyone; it's a great place to explore, learn, or connect with a decidedly rewarding local culture. In this laid-back country, though, planned itineraries do well to give way to spontaneity. Most trips begin in **Bangkok**—the country's capital and commercial center—and travelers' itineraries tend to include some beach time mixed in with a bit of history and adventure.

If at all possible, plan your trip around a passion or interest. Like Thai food. Start at the **Blue Elephant** cooking school in Bangkok, or try the rural-based **Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School** in the north, to learn how to prepare food the Thai way. Or simply discover local specialties by exploring the country's markets and many upmarket Thai restaurants. Interested in massage? Upscale **Chiva-Som Academy,** in Bangkok, teaches the art of this fascinating ancient tradition. If adventure is more your thing, head to Chiang Mai for some **white-water rafting,** or watch wildlife in **Khao Yai National Park,** north of Bangkok, or **Khao Sok,** in the south.

Curious about Thailand's long history and architecture? Bangkok's many temples and museums will enchant. Want to get enlightened or learn about Buddhism? Consider taking a meditation course; the "Middle Way" is not as easy as you may think. Try the **House of Dhamma,** in Bangkok; **Wat Ram Poeng,** near Chiang Mai; **Wat Suan Mokkh,** near Surat Thani; or **Wat Khao Tham,** on beautiful Koh Pha Ngan. These are just a few of the many special activities possible in Thailand. Find what suits you and go for it.

When flying directly to Thailand from the U.S. or Europe, watch out for **jet lag;** it takes some time to adjust to the abrupt climatic and culinary changes. It is best to go easy at the start. Arrival in frenetic Bangkok, with its intense traffic, heat, and humidity, can be a bit overwhelming—it all takes some time to get used to, and if you're doing a 1-week tour, you might just be settling in and starting to enjoy things by the time you leave. So do yourself a favor and factor in some rest days, even if it's just 1 or 2, at the beginning of your trip.

Multiple-week stays allow more opportunities to both explore the hills up north and lie on a white sandy beach. With shorter itineraries, you might want to limit yourself to Bangkok, plus a short visit to rural northern reaches near Chiang Mai, or a few days on one of the beaches in the south. Weather plays an important part in planning, too. The cool, dry season—November to February—is the best time to go, but this is also high season, which pushes up prices and makes bookings difficult. For these months, the north is much cooler than the rest of the country, while the monsoon season (June–Oct) brings heavy rain and floods almost everywhere. The best time to visit Phuket and areas on the Andaman coast is from November to April. For Ko Samui and other beach destinations on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand, the optimal time to visit is from February to October (the result of opposing monsoonal systems). Check destination chapters for more weather specifics.

You also might want to plan your trip around a Thai holiday, such as **Songkran,**

the Thai New Year. The celebration officially lasts 3 days, but often goes on for a week, depending on the region, climaxing on April 13. **Loy Krathong,** celebrated at the full moon in October or November, is another magical holiday throughout Thailand (though the best celebrations are in the north at Sukhothai or Chiang Mai); during this holiday, small banana-stem floats are floated on rivers and paper lanterns are released into the sky to absolve the previous year's sins.

1 THE REGIONS IN BRIEF

The Thais compare their land to the shape of an elephant's head, seen in profile, facing the West, with the southern peninsula representing the dangling trunk. Thailand is roughly equidistant from China and India, and centuries of migration from southern China and trade with India brought tremendous influences from each of these Asian nations. Thailand borders Myanmar (Burma) to the northwest, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia to the east, and Malaysia to the south. Its southwestern coast stretches along the Andaman Sea, its southern and southeastern coastlines perimeter the Gulf of Thailand, and every coast boasts a myriad of islands. Thailand covers roughly 514,000 square km (198,450 sq. miles)—about the size of Texas—and is divided into six major geographic zones.

BANGKOK Located on the banks of the Chao Phraya River—Thailand's principal waterway—Bangkok is more or less in the geographical heart of the country on both a north-south and east-west axis. It seems to exert a magnetic attraction on both rural Thais and foreign visitors, as it is home to more than 10% of the Thai population, as well as plenty of expats, who bustle along with the commuter crowd, glad to be based in this crazy metropolis. Its congested streets and infamous gridlock can be frustrating for visitors, though its glittering temples, colorful markets, and carefree inhabitants can be endearing in equal measure.

THE EASTERN SEABOARD The coastline east of Bangkok—sometimes referred to as the Eastern Gulf—is home to Pattaya, Rayong, and Trat. These are popular weekend destinations among Thai families and expats alike. For the best beaches, however, you'll need to hop on a boat to Ko Samet, Ko Chang, or Ko Kood, all of which offer luxury resorts and superb scuba diving. The region is also home to the country's greatest concentration of sapphire and ruby mines at Chanthaburi (known as Muang Chan). Chanthaburi has been a gem trading center for centuries and its so-called weekend "gem" market is fun, but certainly not for treasure seekers; the standards of the precious stones sold here are infamously low.

THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA A long, narrow peninsula protrudes south to the Malaysian border with the Andaman Sea on the west and the Gulf of Thailand to the east. The gulf coastline (from Bangkok to Narathiwat) extends more than 1,000km (621 miles), while the western shoreline (from Ranong to Satun) runs about 500km (311 miles). Due to the high number of popular destinations in the south, this guide divides the region into two chapters—one focusing on the east coast and another focusing on the west coast.

Off the Gulf coast, Ko Samui has gone from sleepy hideaway to heaving tourist magnet, while Ko Phangan and Ko Tao are following in its wake. Farther south, the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani are home to a considerable

Chiang Saen
Chiang Khong
Chiang Rai
Fang
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
Mae Hong Son
Pai
NORTHERN HILLS
Chiang Mai
Yom
Nan
LAOS
VIETNAM
Lamphun
Lampang
Mae Sariang
Wang
Phrae
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Si Satchanalai
Uttaradit
Loei
Udon Thani
Ban Chiang
Sukhothai
Tak
Phitsanulok
Nakhon Phanom
Mae Sot
Chi
Khon Kaen
Phetchabun
Kamphaeng Phet
ISAN
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Ping
Nakhon Sawan
Phimai
Mun
Noi
Khwae Noi
Lopburi
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)
Ubon Ratchathani
CENTRAL PLAINS
Chao Phraya
Surin
Ayutthaya
Nam Tok
Kanchanaburi
Sam Rong
Nakhom Pathom
Bangkok
Chon Buri
CAMBODIA
Andaman Sea
Phetchaburi
Cha-Am
Bangsaen
Hua Hin
Pattaya
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Rayong
Chanthaburi
Koh Samet
CHANTHABURI PROVINCE
EASTERN SEABOARD
Ko Chang
Trat
Chumphon
Ko Tao
Ko Mak
Ko Kut
Ranong
Ko Phangngan
Phnom Penh
Ko Surin
(Surin National Marine Park)
Ko Samui
Khanom
Surat Thani
Gulf of Thailand
(Gulf of Siam)
VIETNAM
Phangnga
Nakhon Si Thammarat
SOUTHERN PENINSULA
Phuket
Krabi
Ko Phi Phi
Andaman Sea
Songkhla
Had Yai
Pattani
Ko Tarutao
(Tarutao National Park)
Narathiwat
MALAYSIA
Sungai Kolok
0
100 mi
0
100 km

Muslim population. Take extreme care in this region: Violent attacks by insurgents target public markets as well as transport and Buddhist centers. Off the Andaman coast, the islands of Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, and Ko Lanta, as well as the peninsula of Krabi, boast some of the country's most beautiful beaches.

THE CENTRAL PLAINS Thailand's central plains are an extremely fertile region: Its abundant jasmine rice crops are exported worldwide. The main attractions of the region, however, are the atmospheric ruins at the historic cities of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, both former capitals of the Kingdom of Siam. To the west of the central plains, Kanchanaburi, on the River Kwai, is the site of the infamous World War II "Death Railway," where an estimated 16,000 Allied prisoners of war and around 100,000 Asians died during its construction for the Japanese. Other significant towns in this region are Lopburi, a favorite haunt of former kings of Siam; Phitsanulok, a major crossroads in the northern plains; and Mae Sot, a remote outpost near the Myanmar border and jumping-off point for a trip to Ti Lor Su Waterfall, in the Umphang Wildlife Reserve.

NORTHERN THAILAND The north is a mountainous region and coolest from November to February, when conditions are ideal for trekking to visit the region's brightly dressed hill-tribes. This is also elephant country, but now that logging has been banned, there is little for them to do but provide entertainment for tourists in elephant camps. The cool hills in the north are well suited for farming, particularly for strawberries, asparagus, peaches, and litchis. Today, agricultural programs and charities, such as the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, are retraining hill-tribe villagers whose main crop used to be opium poppies. Settlements around Doi Tung have gallantly implemented crop replacement schemes, propagating coffee and macadamia nuts.

The major towns in the north are Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, and Mae Hong Son. The best way to enjoy the region's scenic beauty is by taking a motorbike or car around the Mae Hong Son Loop; or, for those with less time, a quick trip to the country's highest point in Doi Inthanon National Park, or to the infamous Golden Triangle, where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet, can be superb.

ISAN The broad and relatively infertile northeast plateau that is Isan is the least developed region in Thailand. Bordered by the Mekong River, it separates the country from neighboring Laos, though the people of Isan share linguistic and cultural similarities with their neighbors. The region's attractions include the remains of a Bronze Age village at Ban Chiang, as well as major Khmer ruins at Phimai and Phnom Rung, near Nakhorn Ratchasima, also known as Khorat. Other than potash mining and subsistence farming, the region has enjoyed little economic development.

2 3 DAYS IN BANGKOK

The Thai capital has a lot to offer but can be rather daunting at first, what with its chaotic traffic and hectic pace. Visitors who remain calm and curious will experience the exoticism of the East without too much discomfort, though.

Tack this short itinerary onto the beginning—or the end—of any trip to Thailand. You can also split it up: Spend time touring the city sites at the start of the journey and then use a day at the end to fill your suitcase with gorgeous handicrafts, silk fashions, or souvenirs.

Day 1: Bangkok's Riverside Sites

Start your tour of Bangkok at **Central Pier,** next to Saphan Taksin BTS, where you can hop on a fast river taxi or the more comfortable wide-berth Chao Phraya Tourist Boat.

Heading north along the S-curve of the river, you can hop off to visit many of the city's historical sites. The first stop should be Tha Tien, for **Wat Po** (p. 126) and the Giant Reclining Buddha. From there, it's a short walk to the **Grand Palace** (p. 124) and the famed **Wat Phra Kaew** (p. 124), the temple of the celebrated Emerald Buddha.

Take a lunch break to rest your legs and eyes; then you can carry on upstream to visit the **National Museum** (p. 127), where you can easily spend a couple of hours delving into this proud nation's past. After visiting the museum, for a different type of sightseeing, wander north to Banglampoo and nose around **Khao San Road,** the vibrant backpacker strip. You can return to Central Pier by boat from Tha Phra Arthit before 6pm, or settle down for dinner at **Hemlock** (p. 118) and take a cab to your hotel later.

This is a lot to see in a day—but it does cover the city's unmissable sights and avoids traffic delays by using river transport. If you enjoy traveling on the river, you may want to end the day by taking a **dinner cruise** (see p. 119 for options), on which you can see the city by night.

Day 2: Bangkok Shopping & Eating

Start your second day in Bangkok at **Jim Thompson's House** (p. 128), home of the American who rejuvenated the Thai silk industry. It's right in the city center (near the National Stadium BTS).

The shimmering silks on display in the shop at Jim Thompson's should put you in the mood for a full frontal attack on the city's shops: About a 10-minute walk away from Jim Thompson's House is **Mah Boon Krong** (**MBK;** p. 139), a giant mall catering to Thai teenagers and bargain hunters alike. Adjacent to the Siam BTS is **Siam Paragon** (p. 139), a center filled with superluxury boutiques. If you still haven't found that special something, continue on to the funky, trendy clothing stores found in the maze of lanes in **Siam Square** (p. 140).

Have lunch at **Crystal Jade,** in Siam Paragon, and then drop off your shopping bags at the hotel before indulging yourself in a spa treatment. All top-end hotels in Bangkok have excellent spas, but if yours doesn't have one, head for **Healthland** (p. 134), on Sathorn Road.

You should be feeling light as a feather after this, but you'll feel even lighter when you ride up to the 54th floor of the State Tower, on Silom Road, to knock back a sundowner at the **Sky Bar** (p. 144) while drinking in the city views in every direction.

For dinner, if you want a sense of occasion, head around the corner to **Le Normandie** (p. 105) or any of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel's fine dining restaurants. If you'd rather keep it simple and inexpensive, drop by **Harmonique** (p. 108), a few steps farther, in a lane off Charoen Krung Road.

Both these dining options are just a few blocks away from the city's most famed streets for go-go bars—**Patpong 1** and **2** (p. 144). Take a stroll around the bustling night market, and if you're curious, check out the bars (stick to downstairs bars, as those upstairs bring grief) and buy the girls a drink. When you've had enough, hop in a cab back to the hotel.

Day 3: Day Trip from Bangkok

To get a broader sense of the country, take a day trip out of town on your third day in Bangkok. Options include a visit to the **Ancient City** (p. 146), which has reproductions of the nation's best-known buildings; a wonderful boat and bus trip to the former capital of **Ayutthaya** (p. 149); a train ride to **Kanchanaburi** (p. 148), home of the "Death Railway"; or a trip to **Khao Yai National Park** (p. 149), which offers welcome greenery.

3 1-WEEK ANCIENT CAPITALS TOUR

This 1-week itinerary, heading north from Bangkok, enables you to trace the nation's legacy back to its ancient seats of power. First, you'll head north to Ayutthaya—the capital of Siam until the late 18th century—and then you'll carry on via Phitsanulok to Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, the very origins of the Kingdom of Siam, before finally ending up in the ancient Lanna capital of Chiang Mai, which became a part of Siam/Thailand only in the early 20th century. Pack light for this journey, as you'll be carrying your own luggage some of the way.

Day 1: Bangkok to Ayutthaya

You can make the short trip to Ayutthaya by boat or minibus (see "Side Trips from Bangkok," in chapter 7), or even by local train from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong train station (easily accessed by subway).

In Ayutthaya, check into **Krungsri River Hotel** (p. 281), one of the best accommodations options; though it's basic, it's convenient to the train station. From there, cross by rickety local ferry to the center of the old city and see the highlights. The city museums include the **Ayutthaya Historical Study Center** (p. 278) and the **Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** (p. 278); both contain good historical info and artifacts. To tour the main temples, hire either an elephant or a bicycle. Don't miss **Wat Phra Mahathat** (p. 280), in the city center, the most striking of the Ayutthaya ruins, and **Wat Phra Si Sanphet** (p. 280), with its three slender stupas. If you have time, take a late-afternoon tour by longtail boat around the city island to see the more far-flung ruins.

In the evening, catch a meal at the colorful **Chao Phrom Night Market** (p. 282) or at one of the city's little floating restaurants. The ruins are illuminated in the evening, so a **night tour** is another option.

Day 2: Bang Pa-In, Lopburi & Ayutthaya

Arrange a car and driver from the hotel to take you to these two destinations near Ayutthaya, allowing half a day for each site. **Bang Pa-In** (p. 282) is not an ancient Siamese capital, but it is a royal retreat that was particularly popular in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910); the curious mix of Thai and Western colonial architecture makes a striking contrast with the ruins at Ayutthaya.

Grab a bowl of rice or noodles for a roadside lunch as you head north to **Lopburi** (p. 283), another favorite royal retreat in the era of King Narai. Visit **King Narai's Palace** and the museum on the grounds. Take a look at **Ban Vichayen,** once home of King Narai's Western advisor, Constantine Phaulkon; and visit the town's mischievous macaques at **Phra Prang Sam Yot** before heading back to **Ayutthaya.**

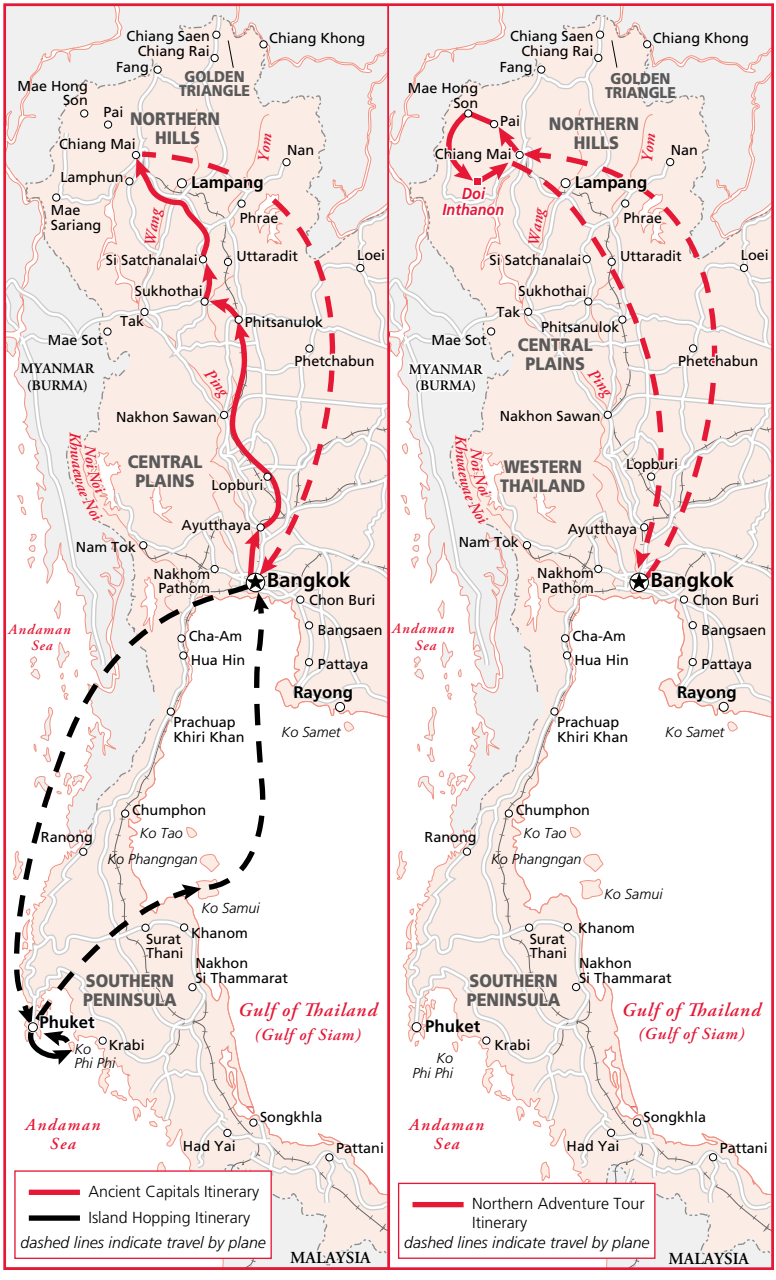
In the evening, take a stroll along **Naresuan Road Soi 2,** where you'll find several places serving Western food, and some providing free Internet access and live music.

Day 3: Ayutthaya to Phitsanulok

Check out early and catch a northbound train to **Phitsanulok** (p. 284). Most of the day will be spent looking out over endless rice paddies from the train during the 300km (186-mile) journey. Check in at **Topland Hotel** (p. 286)**,** and then walk around the corner to **Wat Yai** (p. 288)**,** the town's only must-see attraction. In the evening, take a stroll downstream beside the Nan River to the **Night Market** (p. 285)**;** order some flying vegetables (morning glory) and have your camera ready to catch them in flight.

Day 4: Phitsanulok to Sukhothai

Call ahead to **Ruean Thai Hotel** (p. 290), in Sukhothai, to book a room and arrange a pickup from the bus station, and then hop on a bus for the hour-long journey from


Chiang Saen
Chiang Rai
Chiang Khong
Fang
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
Mae Hong Son
Pai
NORTHERN HILLS
Chiang Mai
Yom
Nan
Lamphun
Lampang
Mae Sariang
Wang
Phrae
Si Satchanalai
Uttaradit
Loei
Sukhothai
Tak
Phitsanulok
Mae Sot
Phetchabun
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Ping
Nakhon Sawan
Nan Noi
Khwae Noi
CENTRAL PLAINS
Lopburi
Ayutthaya
Nam Tok
Nakhom Pathom
Bangkok
Chon Buri
Andaman Sea
Cha-Am
Bangsaen
Hua Hin
Pattaya
Rayong
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Ko Samet
Chumphon
Ranong
Ko Tao
Ko Phangngan
Ko Samui
Surat Thani
Khanom
Nakhon Si Thammarat
SOUTHERN PENINSULA
Gulf of Thailand (Gulf of Siam)
Phuket
Krabi
Ko Phi Phi
Songkhla
Had Yai
Pattani
MALAYSIA
Ancient Capitals Itinerary
Island Hopping Itinerary
dashed lines indicate travel by plane
Doi Inthanon
WESTERN THAILAND
Northern Adventure Tour Itinerary
dashed lines indicate travel by plane

Phitsanulok. Once you've checked in, rent a motorbike or bicycle, and spend the rest of the day exploring **Sukhothai Historical Park** (p. 288). Start at the **Ramkhamhaeng National Museum** to get clued in on this remarkable site, and then head for the most important ruins at **Wat Phra Mahathat, Wat Traphang Tong,** and **Wat Si Chum.**

Ask at the hotel if there is any **light and sound show** presentation at the historical park in the evening. If there is, it's a sight to remember; if not, settle for a satisfying dinner and drinks at the uniquely eccentric **Dream Café** (p. 291).

Day 5: Sukhothai to Si Satchanalai and Chiang Mai

Most of this day is spent wending your way north from the central plains into the northern hills, with a welcome break at the ruined temples of **Si Satchanalai** (p. 292). It's easiest to hire a car and driver, as the site at Si Satchanalai can be tricky to find. The main temples to see here are **Wat Chang Lom** and **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat.** On leaving the site, look out for another roadside lunch stop, and then sit back and watch the landscape become more dramatic as you make your way to **Chiang Mai** (p. 309), capital of the north. This ancient but hip city has a great range of accommodations, so check out the listings (p. 313) to find somewhere to stay that suits your budget.

You'll want to stretch your legs after a day in the car, so make for the **Night Bazaar** (p. 336), and be prepared for some furious bargaining as you shop for souvenirs. If hunger pangs overtake you while shopping, pop into **Anusarn Market** (p. 321), and follow the most appealing aroma. If you can wait, take a tuk-tuk over the river to **Riverside** (p. 325), where you can eat, drink, and dance to live music till late.

Day 6: Chiang Mai

For the last full day of this trip, you get to make a choice. If you'd like to get a sense of the city's long history, take a walk from the northeast corner to the southwest corner of Chiang Mai's Old City, winding through the back streets and taking in the principal temples (**Wat Chiang Man, Wat Chedi Luang,** and **Wat Phra Singh**) (p. 327). Stop off for lunch at either **Ruen Tamarind** (p. 325) or **Huen Phen** (p. 326) along the way, and sit for a while in **Buak Had Park** at the end.

If, on the other hand, you've had enough history for one trip, you might like to spend the day learning how to prepare several Thai dishes at the **Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School** (p. 331). Other options include **boat trips** on the river, a visit to an **elephant camp,** a (brief) visit to a **hill-tribe village,** or a gentle round of **golf** on a nearby course. Check out p. 332 for more ideas.

In the evening, book tickets for the cultural show at the **Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center** (p. 339), where you can dine on northern specialties and watch traditional dancing. The show finishes at 9:30pm, allowing time for any last-minute shopping at the Night Bazaar, more drinking and dancing at the riverside bars, or packing your bags and getting an early night.

Day 7: Chiang Mai to Bangkok

If you have time before your flight leaves, try to do some last-minute shopping in Chiang Mai. If there's no time, then bon voyage.

4 1-WEEK ISLAND-HOPPING TOUR

This itinerary offers a glimpse at three of Thailand's most lauded beach destinations—Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, and Ko Samui. If you like what you see, you may be tempted to stay longer than suggested here—but don't overstay your visa!

Day 1: Bangkok to Phuket

A short flight and transfer from Bangkok will bring you to **Phuket** (p. 226), which has lodgings that range from luxurious resorts to simple motels; try for a room at **Burasari** (p. 239), at Patong Beach, if you like boutique properties; go for **JW Marriott** (p. 245), on Mai Khao Beach, if you want somewhere away from it all; or stay at the sprawling **Banyan Tree Phuket** (p. 243), if you crave the sort of spa villas that appeal to jet-setters.

Make dinner reservations for 6pm at **Baan Rim Pa** (p. 248), above Patong Beach, and then feast on authentic Thai dishes and soak up the sunset while plotting a week's island hopping.

Day 2: Phuket

Time for some serious rest and relaxation. Give yourself a day on the beach of your choice or by the pool, snacking from the pool bar or passing vendors on the beach. Read a novel, take a snooze, or terrorize everyone by screaming around the bay on a jet ski.

In the evening, if you have kids in tow, sign up for the dinner and show at **Phuket Fantasea** (p. 257), on Kamala Beach. If not, check out the **Phuket Playhouse** cabaret show (p. 258), in Patong, accompanied by dinner and cocktails.

Day 3: More of Phuket

Today you'll explore the island by car (and driver if necessary). Begin in the southwest corner at **Kata Beach** and drive up the west coast, pausing at every beach (**Karon, Patong, Kamala,** etc.) and rating them all. See if any score higher than **Nai Thon,** near the northern end of the west coast.

Stop in at the **JW Marriott,** on Mai Khao Beach (p. 245), for lunch at any of their restaurants, before heading inland to look at the **Gibbon Rehabilitation Project** (p. 254), located in the northeast corner of the island. Head back south through the center of the island, pausing at Thalang to admire the **Heroines' Monument** (p. 233), and, if time allows, **Wat Phra Thong** (p. 233).

Park up in Phuket Town and take a stroll around the colonnaded streets of Sino-Portuguese houses before dining at **Ka Jok See** (p. 250). The after-dinner dance might make you ready for bed, but if you want more, head for Bangna Road, at Patong Beach, and find a perch in **Scruffy Murphy's** (p. 257) or some similar joint.

Day 4: Day Trip to Ko Phi Phi

Just about every tour operator on Phuket runs day trips to Ko Phi Phi, so check the schedule of a few and sign up for one that appeals.

After a boat ride of a couple of hours, in which time you should see plenty of karst outcrops of the kind that typify Phang Nga Bay, you'll probably be taken to **Phi Phi Leh** (p. 268) first (the smaller, uninhabited island), where you'll have the chance to snorkel and explore Maya Bay, made famous by the movie *The Beach.*

From here you'll go to **Phi Phi Don** (p. 268), which, depending on the season, might be heaving with holidaymakers. Lunch is usually included in these day trips, and a clamber up to the viewpoint over the back-to-back horseshoe bays brings a sight to treasure. Once back on Phuket, spruce yourself up and treat yourself to a meal to remember at **The Boathouse Wine & Grill,** on Kata Beach (p. 247).

Day 5: Phuket to Ko Samui

Hop on a flight from Phuket to **Ko Samui** (p. 191), and you'll be able to compare the sand and sea color at Thailand's two most popular beach destinations. The fun begins at Samui airport, where you'll feel like you've landed in Disneyland.

If it's peace and quiet you're after, book into the **Six Senses Hideaway** (p. 200), in the northeast corner of the island, where you can be sure nobody will disturb you except your personal butler. If you're more

into partying, go for the **Centara Grand Beach Resort** (p. 201), which is right in the heart of the action on Chaweng Beach.

Spend the rest of the day relaxing and settling into your resort, which will have plenty of activities on offer if you feel restless. Dine at your chosen resort as well, and get a sound night's sleep before the last full day of this tour.

Day 6: Ko Samui

There are three attractive options for today, from which you'll have to choose just one. The first is to hire a car (with driver if necessary) to explore the island's ring road. Along the way you can take in such sights as phallic rocks, mummified monks, snake and monkey shows, waterfalls, and elephants. The second alternative is to sign up for a tour of the **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p. 208), an area of astounding beauty, where you get to paddle a kayak through turquoise waters and scramble to the top of a hill for a breathtaking view.

The third choice is to indulge in a spa treatment, either in your resort or at **Tamarind Springs** (p. 210), at the northern end of Lamai Beach.

However you spend the day, treat yourself to a celebratory meal in the evening, at **Betelnut** (p. 206), on Chaweng Beach—a taste that will linger long after you have left the island. If you still have energy to burn, make for the **Green Mango** (p. 211), where you'll run into hundreds of other party-minded people.

Day 7: Ko Samui to Bangkok

Put on your best white shirt to show off your suntan, take a cab to the airport, and zip back to Bangkok.

5 1-WEEK NORTHERN ADVENTURE TOUR

Here's a good way to get to see a huge tract of the northern hills, as well as the ancient temples of Chiang Mai. You'll follow the Mae Hong Son Loop out to the northwest border with Myanmar. On the return leg, the route detours from the Loop to the highest point in Thailand, where you might even need a jacket or sweater.

Day 1: Bangkok to Chiang Mai

After a flight or an overnight train journey from Bangkok, arrive in Chiang Mai. Reasonable, centrally located guesthouses dot the **Old City** (p. 319) here. Alternatively, try upscale old-world gems, such as the **Rachamankha** (p. 318), or such modern boutique properties as the **Chedi** (p. 314).

After checking into your hotel, savor the many sites inside the **Old City.** Don't miss **Wat Phra Singh** (p. 328) or **Wat Chedi Luang** (p. 327), two of the city's most revered places of worship. If you have time, shop for fabulous home wares and fashions along chichi **Nimmanheimin Road.** Then get ready for dinner at the fantastic modern Thai-fusion restaurant **The House** (p. 322).

Day 2: Chiang Mai to Pai

Book a car and driver for 5 days, during which you will explore the north. Set out early and catch a show at an **elephant camp** in the **Mae Sa Valley,** before continuing north on Route 107, then branching left at Mae Malai onto Route 1095. The road follows switchbacks over an attractive range of hills before arriving at **Pai** (p. 347). Check into the gorgeous **Belle Villa** (p. 349) outside of town. Take a stroll around town and soak up its laid-back atmosphere. If you need some exercise, walk up to **Wat Mae Yen** (p. 349), on a small hill to the east of town. In the evening, enjoy a tasty Thai meal at **Baan Benjarong** (p. 350), and then check out the live music next door at **BeBop** (p. 350).

Day 3: Pai to Mae Hong Son

It takes about half a day to negotiate the steep, narrow road through the mountains to **Mae Hong Son** (p. 351), and a full day if you stop off to explore **Spirit Cave** (p. 350), located near Soppong.

In Mae Hong Son, check into the **Imperial Tara** or **Fern Resort** (p. 354), and then take a stroll around **Jong Kham Lake** and a grab a few pictures of the Burmese-style temples of **Wat Jong Kham** and **Wat Jong Klang** (p. 354). Dine at **Fern Restaurant** (p. 356) and get an early night, as tomorrow is a long day's drive.

Day 4: Mae Hong Son to Doi Inthanon

Today's journey starts out on the southern (and longest) part of the Mae Hong Son Loop, passing through Khun Yuam and Mae Sariang before branching off to Thailand's highest peak—Doi Inthanon. The long journey doesn't leave much time for sightseeing, but it's a good idea to take frequent, short breaks to stretch your legs. One such stop could be at the **Japanese War Museum,** in **Khun Yuam** (p. 357), while the **Riverhouse Resort,** in **Mae Sariang** (p. 357), is a good choice for lunch. About 80km (50 miles) east of Mae Sariang, turn left onto Route 1088, and then at the small town of **Mae Chaem,** turn right and climb to the peak of **Doi Inthanon** (p. 342). Stay in the log cabins at the national park headquarters, and eat at the neighboring cafe.

Day 5: Doi Inthanon to Chiang Mai

It takes only a couple of hours to drive from the summit of Doi Inthanon to Chiang Mai, so you can spend the morning exploring the upper reaches of the mountain, where it's much cooler than down in the valley. Walk the Kaew Mae Pan trail, near the park headquarters, and notice the wealth of plant and bird life. On the way down, stop at the Wachirathan and Sirithan Falls for some photos, and at the Mae Klang Falls for a grilled chicken and sticky rice lunch on the fly.

Once back in Chiang Mai, unwind with a spa session, either at your hotel or at **Oasis Spa** (p. 334), in the town center.

For dinner, sample some northern delicacies at **Huen Phen** (p. 326).

Day 6: Around Chiang Mai

Head straight up the city's guardian mountain to **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** (p. 339), where you can listen to bells tinkling in the breeze and look down on the city sitting in the valley below. The classic image at this temple is of the gleaming stupa that stands in a marble courtyard at the heart of the complex.

At the base of the mountain, turn left onto the Superhighway, which sweeps around the north of the city, and look out for the turn to **Sankampaeng Road** (p. 337) along Route 1006. After breaking for lunch at **Le Grand Lanna** (p. 322), keep driving east, stopping at any showroom or workshop that catches your eye. These present good opportunities not only for interesting photographs, but for souvenir shopping too.

You can complete your shopping in the evening at the **Night Bazaar** (p. 336), where you'll find everything from a 50¢ hill-tribe doll to a $50,000 antique. If you dine in the simple **Kalare Food & Shopping Center** (p. 327), you can also take in a performance of traditional dance as you eat.

Day 7: Chiang Mai to Bangkok

If you find that all your shopping won't fit into your bags, hurry to the post office and mail a box of goods back home. After that, head for the airport and wave goodbye to the friendly folks of northern Thailand.

5 Introducing Bangkok

With a population of around 9 million in a country of only 66 million, Thailand's capital teems with humanity. As the cultural heart of the kingdom, the city keeps many traditions still visibly intact—yet Bangkok is also a rapidly changing city. If you go beyond the city's transport systems (the Bangkok Transit System [BTS] Skytrain and the Mass Rapid Transit [MRT] subway), it can be a challenge. Heavy traffic, excessive heat and humidity, and, at certain times of the year, smog can make Bangkok truly overwhelming. Nevertheless, to find the charm of the city, all you need to do is to be adventurous and explore areas outside the central business district, packed full of skyscrapers and shopping malls.

Founded when King Rama I moved the city across the river from Thonburi in 1782, Bangkok is not a particularly ancient capital, but rather a cool mix of modernity and tradition. Saffron-robed monks mingle in the *sois* with Starbucks-drinking, cellphone-wielding yuppies or bouffant-wigged socialites known by the abbreviation *hi-so*. Luxurious, glass-clad condos brazenly penetrate the skyscape, juxtaposed by tin-roofed slums teetering along putrid canals. Among the concrete, glittering *wats* (temples) and ramshackle colonial edifices pepper this ancient and vibrant city.

What strikes many upon arrival in the Big Mango, as it's lovingly known, is the highly developed infrastructure, high-end shopping, world-class accommodations, and welcoming people; compared to Hong Kong and Singapore, though, the country is way behind in development, and locals aren't as fluent in English as in these wealthy former colonies. The modernity is often merely a beguiling facade—underneath there's grit and grime.

The culture here is so gloriously rich, though, that exploring Bangkok should be seen as a highlight of any trip to Thailand. And there are rooms to suit any budget. Bangkok's luxury hotels offer unrivaled rates, and visitors can find anything from a basic 300B hostel to a ritzy high-rise suite. The cuisine is itself a worthy adventure; you can choose from fine dining in hip hangouts to simple street food stalls.

Rivaled only by Chiang Mai in the north, Bangkok is above all a great place to shop, for anything from name brand luxury items (and, of course, knockoffs that won't last a week) to fine local handicrafts, antiques, silk, and jewels. And when it comes to nightlife, the endless array of great-value night markets, bars, clubs, and eateries makes for a (potentially) sleepless night.

1 ORIENTATION

ARRIVING

By Plane

Bangkok's **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (airport code BKK; ✆ **02132-1888**), which opened in 2006, is the main hub for all international travelers arriving in Thailand; it also handles domestic flights (with three-digit codes) in and out of the capital. It's 30km (over 18 miles) east of the city. Suvarnabhumi offers a wide range of services, including luggage storage, currency exchange, banks, a branch of the British pharmacy

The Real Bangkok

Referred to as "Krung Thep" by Thais, meaning "The City of Angels," the official name of Bangkok is a proud description of Bangkok's royal legacy—and the world's longest: Krungthepmahanakhon Amonrattanakosin Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilokphop Noppharatratchathaniburirom Udomratchaniwetmahasathan Amonphimanawatansthit Sakkathattiyawitsanukamprasit.

Boots, ATMs, a post office, medical centers (two are 24-hr. clinics), Internet service, and telephones. All of Suvarnabhumi's restaurant and shopping outlets are infamously overpriced (up to 10 times city prices), though; budget travelers would do well to stop by a downtown convenience store to stock up on snacks and drinks. Within the airport complex, just a couple of minutes from the terminal exit, is **Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport** (www.novotel.com), a five-star hotel. For more detailed information on Suvarnabhumi, see **www.suvarnabhumiairport.com**.

Old **Don Muang Airport** (airport code DMG; ✆ **02535-1111**) is 24km (15 miles) north of the heart of the city and is currently serving nonconnecting Thai Airways domestic flights as well as all flights on One-Two-GO and Nok Air. It no longer offers the range of services it used to but still has cafes and diners as well as ATMs. **Amari Don Muang Airport Hotel** (www.amari.com/donmuang) is opposite the airport and is accessed via a sky bridge or a shuttle bus (book in advance). For more details on Don Muang, see **www.donmuangairportonline.com**.

Note: As of 2007, passengers no longer pay any departure taxes at the airport, as these are included in ticket fees. But there are no ATMs beyond Immigration (airside) at Suvarnabhumi, so all those leaving Thailand—or those in transit—must ensure they have enough cash for their onward destination before they enter passport control, especially those paying for visas on arrival in countries such as Myanmar and Indochina, where airside airport ATMs may not exist or may have run out of cash.

GETTING TO & FROM THE AIRPORTS From both Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang, it takes about 40 to 60 minutes to drive to the city center, depending on traffic, and over 90 minutes in heavy rain or at rush hour (or both). The city's larger hotels offer **pickup services** for a fee, but both airports have **public taxi, limousine,** and **bus services** to Bangkok; Suvarnabhumi also has buses to Pattaya. At the moment, taking a taxi or express bus into town is your easiest and fastest option for both airports, though that should change when the Suvarnabhumi **high-speed rail link** opens (it's scheduled to open in April 2010), costing about 150B and cutting the journey time to just 15 minutes.

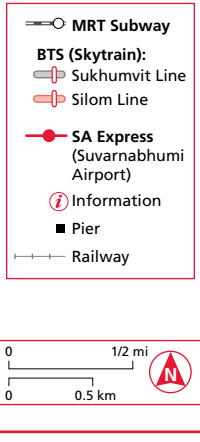
At the Arrival Halls at either airport, don't be tempted by the many limousine or taxi touts. In both airports, simply follow signs to the public taxi or bus stands. Get some small notes (20B or 50B) in the Arrivals Hall before you leave the airport, as you'll need these for the tollbooths. Without tolls, expect to pay between 250B and 300B from either airport to reach most hotels downtown.

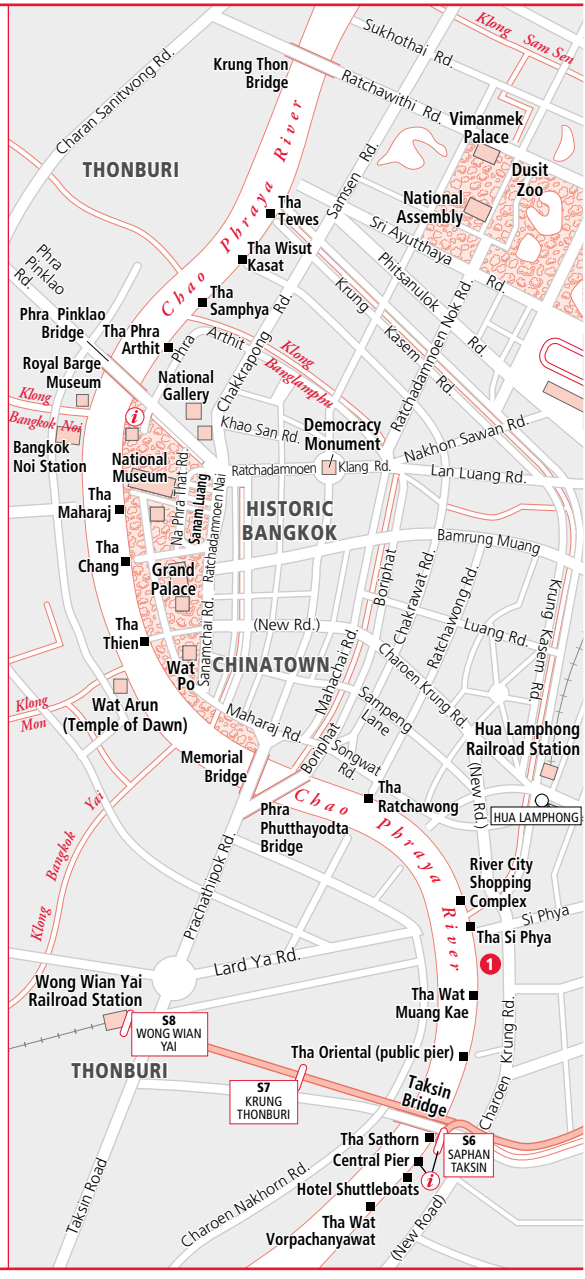
Private limousine services such as AOT offer air-conditioned sedans and drivers from both airports. Look for the booth in Arrivals. Trips from Suvarnabhumi start at 1,200B. Advanced booking is not necessary.

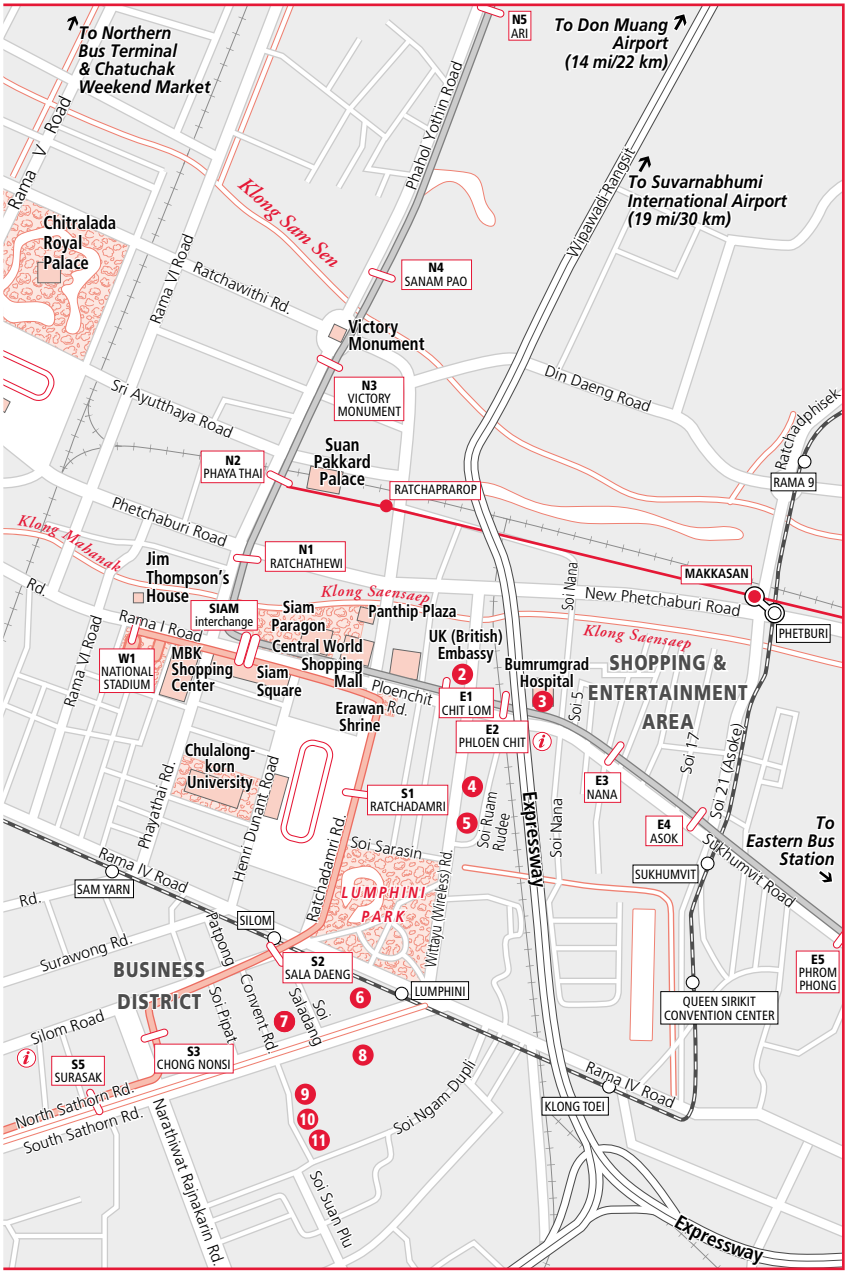
Airport Express buses, located on Suvarnabhumi Level 1 at Gate 8, are convenient and the most inexpensive way to get into the city, costing just 150B. Buses run every

Bangkok at a Glance

American Embassy **5**
Australian Embassy **8**
BNH Hospital **7**
British Embassy **2**
Bumrungrad Hospital **3**
Canadian Embassy **6**
Immigration HQ **10**
Main Post Office **1**
Police HQ **9**
Post Office **11**
New Zealand Embassy **4**






To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
N5 ARI
To Don Muang Airport (14 mi/22 km)
Phahol Yothin Road
Wipawadi Rangsit
To Suvarnabhumi International Airport (19 mi/30 km)
Rama V Road
Klong Sam Sen
Chitralada Royal Palace
Rama VI Road
Ratchawithi Rd
N4 SANAM PAO
Victory Monument
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
Din Daeng Road
Sri Ayutthaya Road
Suan Pakkard Palace
N2 PHAYA THAI
RATCHAPRAROP
Ratchadphisek
RAMA 9
Phetchaburi Road
Klong Mahanak
N1 RATCHATHEWI
Jim Thompson's House
Klong Saensaep
SIAM interchange
Siam Paragon
Panthip Plaza
Rama I Road
Rama VI Road
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
MBK Shopping Center
Siam Square
Central World Shopping Mall
Ploenchit Rd.
Erawan Shrine
UK (British) Embassy
Bumrungrad Hospital
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHLOEN CHIT
Soi Nana
New Phetchaburi Road
MAKKASAN
PHETBURI
Klong Saensaep
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT AREA
Soi 5
Soi 17
Soi 21 (Asoke)
E3 NANA
E4 ASOK
SUKHUMVIT
Sukhumvit Road
To Eastern Bus Station
E5 PHROM PHONG
QUEEN SIRIKIT CONVENTION CENTER
Chulalongkorn University
Henri Dunant Road
Phayathai Rd.
S1 RATCHADAMRI
Soi Ruam Rudee
Expressway
Soi Nana
Ratchadamri Rd.
Soi Sarasin
LUMPHINI PARK
Wittayu (Wireless) Rd.
Rama IV Road
SAM YAN
SILOM
Surawong Rd.
Patpong
BUSINESS DISTRICT
Soi Pipat
Convent Rd.
Soi Saladaeng
S2 SALA DAENG
LUMPHINI
Silom Road
S3 CHONG NONSI
S5 SURASAK
North Sathorn Rd.
South Sathorn Rd.
Narathiwat Rajnakarin Rd.
Soi Ngam Duplu
Soi Suan Plu
KLONG TOEI
Rama IV Road
Expressway

30 minutes from 5am to midnight and cover four routes and most major hotels. For local and intercity buses, you will need to get on a free shuttle, located at Level 2 or 4, going to the **Public Transportation Center.** From there, buses costing around 35B cover 12 city routes, including major BTS stops and the Southern Bus Terminal. For intercity services, go to the relevant ticket counter (daily 6am–9pm) at the Public Transportation Center; three routes serve nearby Pattaya, Jomtien, and Chonburi.

By Train

While a few southern-bound locomotives still use **Thonburi's Bangkok Noi Station** (✆ **02411-3102**), most intercity trains to and from the capital stop at **Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **02621-8701,** or the hot line at 1690), east of Yaowarat (Chinatown). Lying at a major intersection of Rama IV and Krung Kasem roads, it's notoriously gridlocked at morning and evening rush hours, so allow 40 minutes extra for traffic delays. Inside the station, clear signs point the way to the public toilets, pay phones, food court, and baggage check area. One bag costs 30B per day.

Like all major train stations, Hua Lamphong is rife with scammers, preying on foreigners and gullible out-of-towners just arrived in the metropolis. "Officials" may approach you in the station offering help. Be careful—not all may actually be officials; proceed to the ticketing counter or information booth directly.

Metered taxis from the station cost about 50B to 100B to nearby Sala Daeng BTS on Silom Road, depending on the time of day; there is an **MRT** (subway) station at **Hua Lamphong** for connections to the BTS. For Sukhumvit Road, take the MRT to the Sukhumvit stop, and then transfer to the Asok BTS.

By Bus

Bangkok has three major bus stations, each serving a different part of the country. All air-conditioned public buses to the West and the Southern Peninsula arrive and depart from the **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111**), on Putthamonthon Soi 1, west of the river, over the Phra Pinklao Bridge from the Democracy Monument. Service to the East Coast (including Pattaya) arrives and departs from the **Eastern Bus Terminal,** also known as **Ekkamai** (✆ **02391-2504**), on Sukhumvit Road opposite Soi 63 (Ekkamai BTS). Buses to the north arrive and leave from the **Northern Bus Terminal,** aka **Mo Chit** (✆ **02936-2841**), Kampaengphet 2 Road, near the **Chatuchak Weekend Market,** and a short taxi or bus ride from Mo Chit BTS or MRT stations. Affordable, long-distance VIP buses leave from various locations in town and can be booked by any of the agents along Sukhumvit or Khao San roads.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Bangkok Tourist Bureau** has offices at major junctions throughout the city. Call them with any questions at ✆ **02225-7612;** or visit www.bangkoktourist.com. They provide basic information services, maps, brochures, and recommendations. Their main office is at 17/1 Phra Arthit Rd., just under the Phra Pinklao bridge, near Khao San, but they also operate out of the airports and in various kiosks around the city: opposite the Grand Palace, in front of MBK shopping mall, at River City mall, and along Sukhumvit. All offices are open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 4:30pm.

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) offers general information regarding travel in Bangkok and upcountry, and has a useful hot line (✆ **1672**) reachable from anywhere in the kingdom; it's open daily 8am to 8pm. Ironically, TAT's offices are not always conveniently located for foreigners who don't read

Thai. It has a kiosk at Suvarnabhumi International Airport's arrival floor, open daily 8am to 10pm, but their main office is off the beaten track, at 1600 New Phetchaburi Rd., Makkasan, Ratchathewi (✆ **02250-5500**).

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS TAT produces an enormous number of glossy tourist brochures on destinations, including Bangkok; but beware, many may be outdated. Bangkok's free magazines, available in hotel lobbies, are more current. Look for *Where* or *Thaiways,* with maps, tips, and facts covering Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. *Bangkok Dining & Entertainment* specializes mostly in restaurant reviews and nightlife. *BK Magazine* is a fun, free weekly with info on the capital's events (available at any Starbucks). English-language daily newspapers *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* have sections devoted to Bangkok must-sees.

CITY LAYOUT

Nineteenth-century photographs of Bangkok portray the busy life on the **Chao Phraya River,** where a ragtag range of vessels—from humble rowboats to sailing ships—crowded the busy port. This was the original gateway for early foreign visitors who traveled upriver from the Gulf of Siam. Rama I, upon moving the capital city from Thonburi on the west bank to Bangkok on the east, dug a series of canals fanning out from the S-shaped river. For strategic reasons, the canals replicated the moat system used at Ayutthaya, Siam's previous capital, in the hopes of protecting the city from invasion. The city waterways represented the primordial oceans that surrounded the Buddhist heavens. A small artificial island was cut into the land along the riverbank and became the site for the Grand Palace, Wat Phra Kaew (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), and Wat Po. To this day, this quarter is referred to as **Ko** (island) **Rattanakosin.** This is the historical center of the city and the main tourist destination for day trips.

The canals, or *klongs,* continued eastward from Rattanakosin as the city's population grew. Chinese and Indian merchants formed settlements alongside the river to the southeast of the island. The mercantile district of **Yaowarat** (Chinatown) is a maze of busy back alleys. Its main thoroughfare, Charoen Krung Road (sometimes called by its former name, New Rd.), snakes southward, following the shape of the river. On the eastern edge of Chinatown, you'll find the arched **Hua Lamphong railway station,** a marvelous example of fanciful, *fin de siècle* Italian engineering.

Just beyond Yaowarat, along the river, lies **Bangrak** district, where foreign interests built European-style residences, trading houses, churches, and a crumbling colonial Customs House. **The Mandarin Oriental Hotel,** the Grande Dame of Bangkok, sits among them, one of the few great heritage properties left in town. Bangrak's main thoroughfares, Surawong Road, Silom Road, and Sathorn Road, originate at Charoen Krung, running parallel to Rama IV Road. Within Bangrak, you'll find many embassies, hotels and high-rises, restaurants, and pubs, as well as the sleazy nightlife at Patpong or glitzy gay clubs in Silom Soi 4.

Back to Rattanakosin, as you head upriver, you'll hit **Banglampoo,** home to Bangkok's National Museum, Wat Suthat, the Giant Swing, and Klong Phu Khao Thong (Golden Mount). Its central point is Democracy Monument, a roundabout where the wide Ratchadamnoen Klong Road intersects Dinso Road. Around the corner is Khao San Road, which was once solely a backpacker hangout. It still has budget accommodations, inexpensive restaurants, lots of tour agents, and good nightlife, and it's hanging onto its 1970s hippy flavor—but is also heading into the mainstream. Starbucks, Burger King, and Boots are all muscling in on the once funk-filled, alternative vibe here.

Farther north of Banglampoo is leafy **Dusit,** home to Wat Benchamabophit, Vimanmek Palace, the Dusit Zoo, and parks.

As Bangkok spread on the east shore of the river, **Thonburi,** the former site of the capital across the river, remained in relative isolation. While Bangkok was quick to fill in canals, ushering in the age of the automobile, residential Thonburi's canals remained, and a longtail boat ride through the area is a high point of any trip here. Thai riverside homes, both traditional and new, and neighborhood businesses (some housed in floating barges) reveal glimpses of life as it might have been 200 years ago. Access to Thonburi's **Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal** is via the Phra Pinklao Bridge from Banglampoo.

Back on the other side of the river, Bangkok grew and fanned eastward. From Ko Rattanakosin, beyond Bangrak, lies **Pathumwan,** known for its huge market. This is where the famous American journalist and silk connoisseur **Jim Thompson** once lived. His stunning Thai-style house is now open to visitors. Nearby is busy **Siam Square,** with its myriad boutiques and huge shopping malls. This area's hotels, cafes, and nightclubs attract scores of local teenagers and students. Beyond Pathumwan, **Wireless (Witthayu) Road** runs north to south, between **Rama IV Road** (at the edge of Bangrak) and **Rama I Road** (at the edge of Pathumwan). Here, the huge U.S. Embassy complex stands just meters from a clutch of five-star hotels and chic shopping centers such as **All Seasons Place** and **Central Chidlom.**

From Siam Square, **Sukhumvit Road** extends due east, its length traced by the BTS. Many expatriates live along the small side streets, or *sois,* that branch out from Sukhumvit. This area is lined with tourist restaurants and entertainment spots, shops, and big malls—you'll find luxury hotels alongside inexpensive accommodations, fine dining, and cheap local eats, as well as clothing stores and streetside bazaars. (Be aware that there are also lots of schemers in this area.) Easterly situated Sukhumvit is mostly a major commercial center and much of it is connected by the overhead BTS. **Bangkok's Eastern Bus Terminal** is at Ekkamai BTS, on Sukhumvit Soi 63.

FINDING AN ADDRESS Note that even-numbered addresses are on one side of the street and odd-numbered ones the opposite, but they are not always close to each other. So 123 and 124 Silom Rd. will be on opposite sides of the street, but possibly 300m (nearly 1,000 ft.) or even farther apart. Most addresses are subdivided by a slash, as in 123/4 Silom Rd., which indicates that a particular plot has been subdivided into several sections. Some addresses also include a dash, which means that the building itself occupies several plots. You'll find the term *thanon* frequently in addresses; it means "street" in Thai. *Soi* is a lane off a major street and is either numbered or named. If you are looking for "45 Sukhumvit Soi 23," it means plot 45, on Soi 23, off Sukhumvit Road. On Sukhumvit Road, even-numbered *sois* will be on the south side (look for landmarks such as **JW Marriott, Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit,** or **Emporium Shopping Mall**) and odd-numbered *sois* on the north side (same as **Robinson's** and **Thong Lor**).

NEIGHBORHOODS IN BRIEF

Hotels, restaurants, and attractions have been subdivided into smaller regions within the city.

On the River Bangkok's grandest riverside hotels are all clustered near Saphan Taksin. You'll find wholesale silver, jewelry, and antiques stores along Charoen Krung (New) Road and Soi Oriental. Farther upstream, colonial buildings and churches give these old run-down districts a certain charm. Across the river in Thonburi, you can discover Thai dance shows and theater, as well as low-cost riverside diners and luxury spas.

Yaowarat or Chinatown Also along the riverside and just west of the Grand Palace area and Banglampoo, Chinatown is a frenetic maze of stores, old trading warehouses, and great places to eat.

Banglampoo & Historic Bangkok Home to the Grand Palace, this area lies within the area known as Ko Rattanakosin. It contains the city's most important historical sites, including the Grand Palace, Wat Phra Kaew, and Wat Po, as well as the Dusit Zoo and Vimanmek Palace Museum. Within the area are numerous historic *wats* (temples), the National Museum, and the National Theater and Library. Khao San Road is the city's former backpacker district, and moderate accommodations are located among the many budget guesthouses. The only drawback here is that it's a real trek to get to the BTS or MRT.

Bangrak This area likes to think of itself as the Central Business District, though its "downtown" label is debatable. It is bound by Rama IV Road on the north, Yaowarat (Chinatown) on the northwest, and Charoen Krung (New) Road due west, while Silom and Surawong roads run through its center. Many banks, businesses, and embassies have offices in this area, but it is also a good choice for travelers, with malls—such as the Silom Complex—reasonably priced restaurants, tourist hotels, and the seamier Patpong red-light area.

Sukhumvit Road, Ploenchit Road & Chit Lom Known as Rama I Road at its western end, this main east-west thoroughfare is straddled overhead by the BTS. After crossing Ratchadamri Road (at the Erawan Shrine), it then becomes Ploenchit Road and runs directly east, crossing Witthayu (Wireless) Road at Chit Lom BTS (for CentralWorld department store), until it finally becomes Sukhumvit Road at the mouth of the airport freeway. Hotels, shopping complexes, office buildings, and some smaller embassies serve a thriving expat community here. Though rather far from the historic sites, it's convenient for shopping and nightlife.

2 GETTING AROUND

The city has three bus stations (p. 76) and the main train station is Hua Lamphong (p. 76), with another station called Bangkok Noi (p. 76), from where trains head south and west to Kanchanaburi. Within the city, taxis and tuk-tuks (three-wheeled motorized open vehicles) cruise the small streets. (***Note:*** The latter often turn out to be more expensive than the former.) Motorcycle taxis cost little but are unsafe: They're useful only for short hops down *sois* and helpful only if you know your destination in Thai. The BTS (or Skytrain) is the city's efficient elevated rail line, while the subway is known as the MRT. Both connect with the main Hua Lamphong train station, but neither reaches the city's two airports.

Bangkok's taxis are quite affordable and the best choice for door-to-door transportation—if you've got the time. It can take more than 2 hours by taxi to get from one side of town to the other during rush hour. The good news is that, with the convenient BTS and MRT lines (as well as the Chao Phraya River's many boats, which act as daytime river taxis), you can avoid the standstill in the city center. Access to the town's modern and effective public transport is often a key factor in visitors' choice of accommodations and dining, and such areas as Khao San Road, detached from the better modes of transport, are decreasing in popularity when compared to places such as Sukhumvit and Silom.

See the inside front cover of this book for a map of the Bangkok metro lines.

BY BTS The **Bangkok Transit System (BTS)** is called *"rot fai fa"* by Thais, which translates as "skytrain"—an apt description. It opened in 1999 and is the best way for the able-bodied to get around Bangkok. Sadly, its lack of elevators makes it unsuitable for the physically challenged or those who can't cope with lots of stairs. While coverage is still limited, several extensions will be added in coming years to follow the Silom Line extension to Wongwian Yai, which opened in 2009. The train system provides good access to Bangkok's commercial centers. The Silom Line runs from Wongwian Yai in Thonburi across the Chao Phraya River at Saphan Taksin (Taksin Bridge), then through the Silom area to Siam Square. The interchange point for the Sukhumvit Line is at Siam BTS, from where the Sukhumvit Line goes north to Chatuchak Weekend Market (at Mo Chit BTS), or east, along the length of Sukhumvit road to On Nut BTS.

Single-journey tickets cost from 15B to 40B. For single trips, it's fairly straightforward to buy tickets at the vending machines that have place names spelled phonetically in English; you can get small change at the information booth as needed. All ticket types let you through the turnstile and are required for exit, so be sure to hang on to them. You can also buy the stored-value **Sky Smart Pass** that can be topped up (you simply sweep them over sensors at the turnstile) for 100B plus a 30B nonrefundable deposit. It's used up as you travel and lasts 5 years. Or there's a **1-day unlimited travel ticket** for 120B, as well as **30-day Smart Passes** (check student and adult fares), which, though they also require a deposit, save you from fumbling for change at the vending machines every trip. These multitrip cards give you discounted rates, thus counterbalancing the small deposit.

Hours of operation are daily between 6am and midnight. For route details, maps, and further ticket info, check **www.bts.co.th/en/index.asp**.

BY SUBWAY Bangkok's **Mass Rapid Transit (MRT)** was completed in 2004. The 18-stop system will be extended in the future. Beginning at Hua Lamphong Train Station, the MRT heads southeast past Lumphini Park before turning north, up to Lad Phrao, and then makes a wiggle westward to Bang Sue. It has a messy and confusing interchange outside the Dusit Thani Hotel, 100m (328 ft.) from Sala Daeng BTS (on Silom Rd.) and also at Asok BTS (on Sukhumvit Rd.) before its terminus near Mo Chit Bus Station in the north and the Chatuchak Weekend Market. Trains run from 5am to midnight and the system uses small plastic discs or stored-value Smart Passes, which, like the BTS Sky Smart Pass, are swept over sensors. A **1-day pass** costs 120B, while a **3-day pass** costs 230B. The official website, www.bangkokmetro.co.th, is not half as useful as **www.bangkok.sawadee.com/mrta.htm**.

BY PUBLIC RIVERBOATS Efficient and scenic, but not so comfortable, the public riverboats on the Chao Phraya are a great way to get around the sites in the city center and are a remarkable window into local life. Most sightseers will board at Central Pier, down the steps from Saphan Taksin (Taksin Bridge) BTS. The major stops going upstream from Saphan Taksin are Tha Ratchawong (for Chinatown), Tha Thien (near Wat Po), and Tha Chang (near the Temple of the Emerald Buddha).

The tourist boats operated by the **Chao Phraya Express Boat Co.** (✆ **02623-6001;** www.chaophrayaboat.co.th) offer the most relaxed way to travel along this busy river. These steady, wide-bodied vessels are huge and have plenty of seats and make regular stops along the river. Microphone-equipped guides explain in English about the sites you pass. The last boat leaving Taksin Bridge is at 4pm. **Short trips** start at 18B, but you can also buy an **all-day pass,** which includes a map showing all piers and nearby attractions, for 120B. This allows you to hop off and on at will. Boats take about 30 minutes to go from Taksin Bridge to Banglampoo.

Cross-river ferries are small ferries that run only from the east bank to the west, so they're useful for getting to such places as Wat Arun, Klong San Market, or Patravadi Theater. They cost about 3B each way.

BY CHARTERED LONGTAIL BOAT Private boats are a great way to see the busy riverside area and to tour the narrow canals of neighboring Thonburi, though you might want to pack a pair of earplugs for the experience. Boat charters are available at any pier. You can wave one down and, within seconds, you'll be greeted by the shouts of operators. But it's more convenient and probably safer to arrange trips at the riverfront kiosk at **River City** or at the **Grand Palace** (✆ **02225-6179**). If you want a guide, check for one with a TAT license, as you're less likely to be overcharged. Trips of varying length cost up to 1,000B per hour, per boat—though drivers will try to get more. Be specific about destinations and times before you agree to one.

BY PUBLIC BUS Bangkok buses are very cheap, frequent, and fairly fast, but a little bit confusing and not user-friendly in terms of helpful ticket takers, or simply marked routes and stops. There are big blue buses with air-conditioned routes and also cheaper red or small green ones (non-air-conditioned). Anyone with asthma or respiratory conditions would do well to avoid these fume-filled tin cans. You'll need to be especially careful of pickpockets on buses, too.

The most practical air-conditioned routes are A1 (looping from the Grand Palace area to Rama IV Rd., Siam Square, and then east down Ploenchit and Sukhumvit roads), A2 (running a loop through the Business District [Bangrak] area along Silom and Surawong roads), A3 (connecting the Dusit area near the zoo and Khao San Rd. before crossing the Chao Phraya), and A8 (running the length of Rama I, Ploenchit, and Sukhumvit roads). Fares are collected onboard, even for air-conditioned routes—try to have exact change. Fares are cheap, between 12B and 24B.

BY TAXI Taxis are everywhere in this city—except, of course, during a change of shift (3–4:30pm) and in heavy rain. But when they do appear, they are very affordable. Just flag them down (you can hail taxis along any road at any time, or join queues in front of hotels and shopping malls), and always insist that drivers use the meter. At night, especially around Patpong and the Oriental Hotel, stationary taxis will try to fleece passengers

Finds Surfing the Canals

Here's a fun but somewhat odorous way to beat rush-hour traffic, allowing you to cross Bangkok from a starting point close to the Grand Palace and trek back to Sukhumvit through the commercial heart of the city. A narrow, dirty canal, Klong Saen Saep, runs the length of New Phetchaburi Road, with stops in central Bangkok (and all the way to Thong Lor, after a change at Krung Kasem Rd.). These long, low boats are designed to fit under bridges and are fitted with tarps that are raised and lowered by pulleys to protect passengers from any toxic splashes. Rides start at just 8B. Board the boats just north of Wat Mahathat. These canal buses really zip along and churn up a stink, but they offer a unique perspective on the last vestiges of what was once called the "Venice of the East," and taking one gets you back to central Bangkok without having to inhale noxious bus fumes in motionless traffic.

with demands for an extortionately high flat fare. Let these sharks be, and opt for flagging one down that's already traveling along the main road.

Taxis charge a 35B flag fare which covers the first minute; thereafter, it is about 5B per kilometer. Most Thai drivers do not speak English or read maps, so it's good to have your hotel concierge write out any destination in Thai.

Drivers rarely carry change. The best you will get is change from 100B notes, but drivers habitually claim that they have no change in the hope of getting a bit extra. Tipping is not necessary, but a small tip is appreciated.

BY CAR & DRIVER You'd have to be a certified lunatic to drive yourself around Bangkok: Generally anarchic traffic, seas of cavalier motorbikes recklessly breaking every rule, and aggressive tactics by (sometimes amphetamine-fueled) cabbies and truck drivers are the norm. If you're in search of your own wheels, it is best to hire a car with a driver. Reputable companies provide sedans or minivans with drivers who know the city well, some of whom speak English. They also offer the option of an accompanying tour guide—professionals or students who can take you around each sight. The best hotels provide luxury vehicles with an English-speaking driver; otherwise, **World Travel** (✆ **02233-5900**) and **Sea Tour** (✆ **02216-5783**) can also arrange English-speaking drivers/guides to lead you on customized tours but expect to pay around 3,000B a day; it works out far more costly per hour (check with your concierge). Companies such as **Avis** (2/12 Witthayu/Wireless Rd.; ✆ **02251-1131;** www.avisthailand.com) offer chauffeured cars; specify that you want a car with a driver when you call for rates or book through their website.

BY TUK-TUK As much a national symbol as the elephant, the tuk-tuk (named for the sound) is a small three-wheeled, open-sided vehicle powered by a motorcycle engine. It is noisy, smelly, and incredibly cramped for long legs but definitely provides an adventure, especially for first-time visitors to Thailand. They're not recommended for long hauls or during rush hour—if you get stuck behind a bus or truck you'll be dealing with unpleasant exhaust fumes and the resulting migraines. Tuk-tuks are also deathtraps in the event of an accident (and the drivers tend to be a bit kamikaze), so avoid using them on highways. For short trips off highways, during off-peak hours, though, they're convenient. All tuk-tuk fares are negotiated, usually beginning at 50B for foreigners on short trips. Bargain very hard, but know that you'll always pay 100% more than locals.

A warning: Tuk-tuk drivers are notorious for trying to talk travelers into shopping trips or stops at brothels masquerading as massage parlors. They will offer you a very low fare but then dump you at small, out-of-the-way gem and silk emporiums, and overpriced tourist restaurants or brothels. Insist on being taken where you want to go directly or mention the word *poleet;* it's how Thais pronounce "police."

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI On every street corner, packs of drivers in colored, numbered vests stand by to shuttle passengers around the city. Though they get you around fast when you're in a hurry (weaving through traffic jams and speeding down one-way streets the wrong way), they're also incredibly unsafe. These guys don't bother with safety, or insurance, and they stay awake on long shifts with energy drinks such as Red Bull. Use them strictly for short distances (they're popular for short hops to the end of a long *soi,* or side street). They charge from 20B for a few blocks to 60B for greater distances. Hold on tight and keep your knees tucked in. Crash helmets are mandatory these days—so insist on one, but know the flimsy head wear on offer will be almost useless in the event of a crash.

ON FOOT In general, Bangkok is not a pedestrian-friendly city, though improvements have been made in the city center with the construction of skywalks. Bangkok sidewalks are a gauntlet of buckled tiles, loose manhole coverings, and tangled (live) wires. The city also suffers greatly from flooding; be on guard and don't wear fancy open shoes in monsoon season. In addition, Bangkok's pedestrian traffic—particularly in the overcrowded BTS and at rush hour—moves at a painfully slow amble at best, infuriating folks in a hurry. It's best to go with the flow; otherwise, you'll only aggravate yourself. In commercial areas, street vendors take up precious sidewalk space (except on Mon). When crossing busier streets, look for pedestrian flyovers, or, if you have to cross at street level, find others who are crossing and follow them when they head out into traffic. Unlike in Western countries, crossing lights only serve as suggestions here—drivers rarely stop to allow pedestrians to cross.

Fast Facts Bangkok

Airports See "Arriving," earlier in this chapter.

American Express There is no specific agent that handles American Express services in Thailand anymore, but there is an **American Express** office at 388 Pahonyothin Rd., in Bangkok. You can reach the office at ✆ **02273-5500** during business hours (Mon–Fri 8:30am–5pm) or call their customer service hot line (✆ **02273-5544**) with any problems or questions.

ATMs See "Fast Facts: Thailand," in chapter 16.

Banks Many international banks also maintain offices in Bangkok, including **Bank of America,** 87/2 CRC Tower, Witthayu (Wireless) Rd. (✆ **02305-2900**); **JP Morgan Chase,** 20 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02684-2805**); **Citibank,** 82 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02232-2000**); **National Australia Bank,** 90 Sathorn Nua Rd. (✆ **02236-6016**); and **Standard Chartered Bank,** 90 Sathorn Nua Rd., Silom (✆ **02724-6345-52**). However, even if your bank has a branch in Thailand, your home account is considered foreign here; conducting personal banking will require special arrangements before leaving home.

Bookstores You'll find a number of bookstores offering a wide variety of English-language books. The two chains with the best choice are **Asia Books** and **Kinokuniya.** Asia Books is a local chain that specializes in regional titles and some overseas publishers—depending on the outlet. Its main branch is at 221 Sukhumvit Rd., between sois 15 and 17 (✆ **02252-7277**). Outlets with large inventory are at the following locations: **The Emporium** on Sukhumvit at Soi 22, **Siam Paragon,** on level 2, and **CentralWorld,** sixth floor.

The eclectic **Kinokuniya** has three stores in Bangkok, at **The Emporium** on Sukhumvit Road Soi 22, at **Siam Paragon,** and on the sixth floor of the **Isetan department** store at **CentralWorld** (✆ **02255-9834**). **Bookazine** has a good selection at its various locations: in Patpong, on the first floor. at CP Tower, 313 Silom Rd. (✆ **02632-0130**); in Ploenchit, on the third floor, at Amarin Plaza, 498–502 Ploenchit Rd. (✆ **02656-1039**); and at 286 Siam Square, opposite Siam Center (✆ **02251-2641**).

For secondhand books, try **Dasa Books,** 710/4 Sukhumvit (near **The Emporium,** btw. sois 26 and 28; ✆ **02661-2993**), which is a great place to grab a

coffee and browse for long-lost titles, or exchange old novels free of charge. Alternatively, visit **Elite Used Books,** 593–5 Sukhumvit Rd. (✆ **02258-0221**). Almost every international hotel has a newsstand with papers, magazines, and a few books.

Business Hours Government offices (including branch post offices) are open Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm, with a lunch break between noon and 1pm. Businesses are generally open 8am to 5pm. Small shops often stay open from 8am until 7pm or later, 7 days a week. Department stores are generally open 10:30am to 9pm. **TOPS** and **Villa** supermarkets close at 10pm, but there is a 24-hour **Villa Supermarket** on Sukhumvit Road, almost opposite **The Emporium.**

Car Rentals See "By Car & Driver," under "Getting Around," above.

Climate See "When to Go," in chapter 3.

Currency Exchange Most banks will exchange foreign currency (at some banks you may need proof of ID) Monday to Friday 8:30am to 3:30pm. Exchange booths affiliated with the major banks are found in all tourist areas, open daily from 10am to 7pm.

Embassies & Consulates Your embassy in Thailand can (to an extent) assist you with medical and legal matters. Contact them immediately if there is a medical emergency or imminent death, if you've lost your travel documents, or if you need urgent legal advice. The following is a list of major foreign representatives in Bangkok: **Australian Embassy,** 37 S. Sathorn Rd. (✆ **02344-6300**); **British Embassy,** 1031 Witthayu (Wireless) Rd. (✆ **02305-8333**); **Canadian Embassy,** 15th Floor, Abdulrahim Place, 990 Rama IV Rd. (✆ **02636-0540**); **New Zealand Embassy,** 14th Floor, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Place, 87 Witthayu (Wireless) Rd. (✆ **02254-2530**); and the **Embassy of the United States of America,** 120–22 Witthayu (Wireless) Rd. (✆ **02205-4000**). Listen carefully to the phone prompts for after-hours help lines.

Emergencies In any emergency, first call **Bangkok's Tourist Police**, who can be reached at a direct-dial four-digit number, ✆ **1155,** or at 02678-6800. Someone at both numbers will speak English. In case of **fire,** call ✆ **199** or 191, both of which are direct-dial numbers. **Ambulance service** is handled by individual, private hospitals; see "Hospitals," below, or call your hotel's front desk. For operator-assisted **overseas calls,** dial ✆ **100.**

Eyeglass Repair Charoen Optical shops are on Surawong and Silom roads, and in many shopping areas; most can provide replacement glasses at reasonable prices. Always travel with a copy of your prescription. For eye problems, try the **Rutnin Eye Hospital** at 80/1 Sukhumvit Soi 21 (Soi Asok; ✆ **02639-3399**) or private hospitals (see below).

Hospitals All hospitals listed here offer 24-hour emergency service. Be advised that you may need your passport and a deposit of up to 20,000B before you are admitted. Make sure you have adequate travel insurance before you leave home. Major credit cards are accepted. **Bumrungrad Hospital,** 33 Soi 3, Sukhumvit Rd. (✆ **02667-1000;** www.bumrungrad.com), has respected—but costly—health practitioners and is the destination of choice in Bangkok for cosmetic surgery and (comparatively) affordable procedures. **BNH Hospital** (Bangkok Nursing

Home), at 9 Convent Rd., between Silom and Sathorn roads (✆ **02686-2700;** www.bnhhospital.com), is extremely central; **Samitivej Hospital,** at 133 Sukhumvit Soi 49 (✆ **02711-8000**), is recommended for dentistry for young children, and for its maternity and infant wards.

Hot Lines There are regular meetings of **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** in Bangkok and around Thailand. Check their regional website, www.aathailand.org; or call the AA hot line at ✆ **02231-8300.**

Information See "Visitor Information," earlier in this chapter.

Internet & Wi-Fi Internet cafes abound these days, especially along Sukhumvit and Khao San roads. Generally, Internet prices range from 30B to 50B per hour. Big hotels charge much higher rates, of course, plus a service charge, but many hotels now offer a prepaid Wi-Fi access card to guests. Wi-Fi is also free at Starbucks and many other coffee shops throughout the city. On Silom, near Patpong, you'll find the city's most expensive connections.

At **Suvarnabhumi International Airport,** there are cash and credit card touchscreen phones (close to Concourse G), and **Internet facilities** on Levels 4 and 2.

Lost Property If you have lost anything or have had your valuables stolen, call the national police hot line at ✆ **1155.** If you lose something in a taxi, try to recall the color of the cab, the time and place where you picked it up, and the time and place it dropped you off. Even better, remember the cab registration number. Most hotel front desk staff will know which cab company to call to report the loss and make an appeal based on those details. You will need to make a police report at the closest station to the place of loss.

Luggage Storage **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** offers luggage storage for 100B a day, 24 hours a day, on both the Arrivals and Departures level. Most hotels will allow you to store luggage while away on short trips.

Mail See "Fast Facts: Thailand," at the end of this book, for rates and info on the Thailand mail system. Head to the General Post Office (opposite Soi 45) on Charoen Krung Rd., for all mail, telegraph, and parcel services, including Western Union money transfers. If you want to send valuables home, use courier services such as **DHL** (✆ **02345-5000**). Or call **Federal Express** (✆ **1782;** press 2 for English). If this proves too costly, check rates with **Express Mail Service (EMS),** available at post offices throughout the kingdom.

Maps See "Visitor Information," earlier in this chapter.

Newspapers & Magazines *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation,* both English-language dailies, cover local, national, and international news as well as happenings around town, TV listings, and other useful information. for just 25B. Also check out *Where,* a free listings monthly, and *BK Magazine,* a free weekly publication, which publish lighthearted commentaries and event listings for Bangkok.

Pharmacies Bangkok has many local pharmacies. Drugs dispensed here differ widely in quality and authenticity; if in doubt, visit a doctor and get prescribed drugs at a hospital or pick them up at an international store such as Watson's or Boots.

Police Call the **Tourist Police** at ✆ **1155** or 02678-6800, open 24 hours, for assistance. English is spoken.

Post Office The main **General Post Office (GPO)** is a huge post and telegraph office on Charoen Krung Road (✆ **02236-3066**), opposite Soi 45. It's open Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm, and weekends 8am to 1pm.

Radio & TV In Bangkok, **Smooth 105FM** and **Easy FM 105.5** play back-to-back easy-listening pop, with little English.

Most TV channels broadcast local Thai programs or English-language programs, either dubbed or with subtitles. Cable channels, such as CNN, Australia Network, NHK, BBC World, France's TV5, Star Movies, HBO, MTV, and Star Sports, are readily available in serviced apartments and hotels.

Safety In general, Bangkok is a relatively safe city, but be aware, at night, of drug-spiked drinks and, in daytime—especially on transport—of pickpockets. Do not incite trouble; avoid public disagreements and hostility (especially with locals), and steer clear of gambling-related activities. If traveling alone at night, be alert, as you would in any city, and rely on your gut instincts; if you get a bad feeling about a place or situation, remove yourself from the scene. A Thai temper is virtually unheard of, but on rare occasions, it erupts, seemingly out of nowhere, and makes for (potentially lethal) confrontations.

Taxes See "Fast Facts: Thailand," in chapter 16.

Taxis See "Getting Around," earlier in this chapter.

Telephone, Internet Telephone & Fax If you want to make international calls, the easiest option is **Internet cafes,** which offer extremely cheap international call rates via Internet or Skype. Another option is to head to the **Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT) building,** next to the **General Post Office,** on Charoen Krung (New) Road. All post offices and 7-Elevens sell **prepaid phone cards** for use with domestic or international calls. **Public phones** can be found all over the city, but they are not enclosed so can be very noisy. These phones may also charge calls to credit cards and AT&T calling cards.

For **information on a number** within the Bangkok metropolitan area, dial ✆ **1133,** or ask your hotel concierge or operator.

These days, **fax services** are offered by most small Internet cafes and hotels. A single A4 page of typewritten English faxed to the United States costs around 100B.

See "Staying Connected," on p. 57, for more information.

Where to Stay & Dine in Bangkok

The city boasts some of the world's most lauded hotels. But it's not just about five-star properties; lodgings in the Big Mango come in all prices and offer charming service—all much cheaper than what you'd pay in Europe or the U.S., though the gap is closing.

Food is another of Bangkok's greatest draws; newly launched, cutting-edge restaurants compete with traditional Thai diners here, and almost all are excellent. I've listed some of the best below.

1 WHERE TO STAY

Bangkok offers fantastic value for the money, but remember that the hotel prices listed here are, on the whole, the highest *published* rates. Wherever hotels don't have published rates, I've used those from the Internet and, when there are numerous room types and rates, only a selection may be given. Many hotels offer promotional packages that include extras such as breakfast or airport transfers; some airlines also offer great deals on hotels. Unless otherwise noted, hotel rates are subject to a 7% government value-added tax and a 10% service charge. In the high season (mid-Oct to mid-Feb), make reservations well in advance. Check chapter 3 for more information on discounts nationwide. Most hotel rooms are smoke free, so you'll need to specify when booking if you are a smoker.

Note: Hotel websites and Internet sites such as **www.asiahotels.com** often offer special rates for four- and five-star hotels in Bangkok.

AT THE AIRPORTS

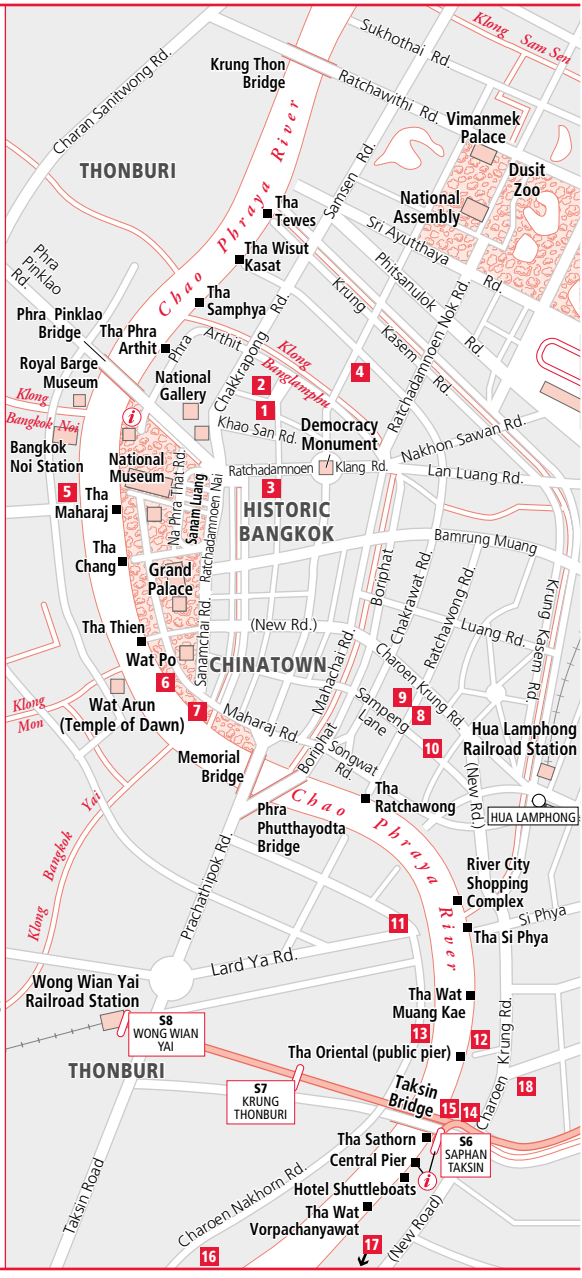
Hotels at **Don Muang** and **Suvarnabhumi International airports** are useful if you have a very-early-morning flight and don't want to allow the 45 to 90 minutes' traveling time from the city. **Amari Don Muang Airport Hotel** (✆ **02566-1020;** www.amari.com) is linked by a bridge to the terminal and comes with a pool. Expect standard rooms from 2,975B. **Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport** is a few minutes' drive away and offers four restaurants, plus a business center, Wi-Fi, and fitness facilities. Rates run from 5,000B per room (✆ **02131-1111;** www.novotel.com).

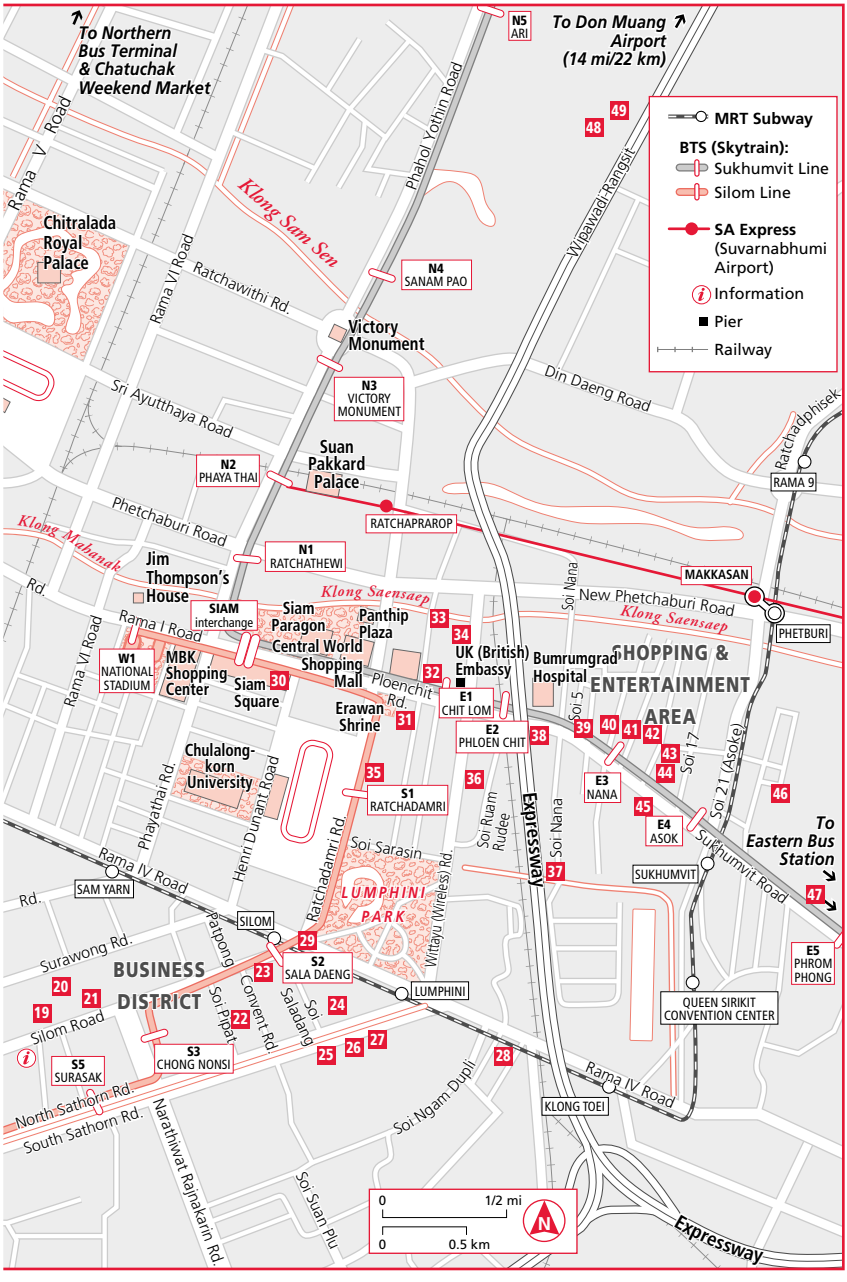
ON THE RIVER

During the dry season, the riverside is one of the most picturesque parts of the city. A whole range of riverside hotels exists, and all boast great views and most operate free shuttle boats along the teeming Chao Phraya River, which makes them handy for shoppers, diners, spa-goers, and anyone needing the BTS. The finest don't come cheap, but, in recent years, plenty of new and reasonable midrange choices have opened.

Where to Stay in Bangkok

- Amari Don Muang Airport Hotel **48**
- Amari Boulevard Hotel **39**
- Arnoma Hotel Bangkok **33**
- Arun Residence **6**
- The Atlanta **37**
- Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa **16**
- The Banyan Tree **26**
- Bossotel Inn **14**
- Buddy Lodge **1**
- Chakrabongse Villas **7**
- Chinatown Hotel **10**
- City Lodge **40**
- Conrad Bangkok **36**
- Dream Bangkok **43**
- The Dusit Thani **29**
- The Eugenia **46**
- The Four Seasons Bangkok **35**
- Grand China Princess Hotel **9**
- Grand Hyatt Erawan **31**
- Grand President **42**
- Hotel de Moc **4**
- Ibrik Resort **5**
- Inter-Continental Hotel **32**
- JW Marriott **38**
- Le Bua at State Tower **18**
- Luxx Hotel **20**
- The Mandarin Oriental **12**
- The Metropolitan **25**
- Millennium Hilton **11**
- Montien Riverside Hotel **17**
- Narai Hotel & 222 **19**
- Novotel Bangkok **30**
- Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport **49**
- The Peninsula Bangkok **13**
- Refill Now **47**
- Royal Hotel **3**
- Shanghai Mansion **8**
- Shangri-La Hotel **15**
- Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit **45**
- Silom Convent Garden **22**
- Siri Sathorn **24**
- Sofitel Silom Bangkok **21**
- Suk 11 Guesthouse **41**
- The Sukhothai **27**
- Swiss Lodge **23**
- Swissôtel Nai Lert Park **34**
- The Tivoli **28**
- Viengtai Hotel **2**
- Westin Grande Sukhumvit **44**




To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
To Don Muang Airport (14 mi/22 km)
MRT Subway
BTS (Skytrain):
Sukhumvit Line
Silom Line
SA Express (Suvarnabhumi Airport)
Information
Pier
Railway
Chitralada Royal Palace
Klong Saen Saep
Victory Monument
Suan Pakkard Palace
Jim Thompson's House
SIAM interchange
Siam Paragon
Panthip Plaza
Central World Shopping Mall
MBK Shopping Center
Siam Square
Erawan Shrine
Chulalongkorn University
UK (British) Embassy
Bumrungrad Hospital
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT AREA
Lumphini Park
BUSINESS DISTRICT
Queen Sirikit Convention Center
To Eastern Bus Station
Expressway
Rama I Road
Rama IV Road
Phetchaburi Road
Sri Ayutthaya Road
Din Daeng Road
Ratchadaphisek
New Phetchaburi Road
Sukhumvit Road
Silom Road
Surawong Rd.
Ploenchit Rd.
Ratchadamri Rd.
Henri Dunant Road
Phahol Yothin Road
Wipawadi Rangsit
Soi Nana
Soi 21 (Asoke)
Soi Ngam Duphi
Soi Suan Plu
Narathiwat Rajnakarin Rd.
North Sathorn Rd.
South Sathorn Rd.
N1 RATCHATHEWI
N2 PHAYA THAI
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
N4 SANAM PAO
N5 ARI
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHLOEN CHIT
E3 NANA
E4 ASOK
E5 PHROM PHONG
S1 RATCHADAMRI
S2 SALA DAENG
S3 CHONG NONSI
S5 SURASAK
RATCHAPRAROP
MAKKASAN
PHETBURI
RAMA 9
SILOM
LUMPHINI
SAM YAN
SUKHUMVIT
KLONG TOEI
0 1/2 mi
0 0.5 km
N

Very Expensive

Chakrabongse Villas Overrated Rather optimistically touted as "Thailand's best-kept secret," this clutch of traditional wooden Thai houses is now on every website and in every guide, so be sure to call ahead to reserve a space. The villas here are built on the river, opposite Wat Arun, on the grounds of a Belle Epoque–era mansion that was once home to a Thai prince. Though they can suffer from mildew during rainstorms, the rooms' rustic style is unique in urban Bangkok, and the property will appeal to people who don't mind somewhat lackluster service. In dry months, the garden, riverside decks, and pool are a delight. For the price, though, the venue is overhyped.

396 Maharat Rd., Tha Tien, Bangkok 10200. ✆ **02224-6686.** Fax 02225-3861. www.thaivillas.com. 4 units. 10,000B–25,000B. MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

The Mandarin Oriental ★★★ Kids Bangkok's oldest and best-known hotel has been frequented by Thai royalty and glitterati, as well as a long roster of sports and film stars. Established in 1876, the hotel's original building has evolved into a modern, functional venue known for its exceptional service. But this grande dame does not rest easily on her laurels. Additions include two delightful pools, the revamped Sala Rim Nam restaurant (see the "Dinner with Thai Dance" section, under "Where to Dine"), a "Sanuk Sanuk" kids' club, and an Ayurvedic Penthouse at the Oriental Spa, proving the hotel is at pains to keep up with the times. Rooms and suites are furnished in Thai silks, using soft earthy tones or vivid hues; the older Garden Wing faces southwest onto the river, offering truly picturesque views. West-facing corner suites in the newer River Wing also have balconies overlooking the water. The hotel's restaurants, such as Le Normandie (p. 105), are all regarded as top-notch.

48 Oriental Ave., Bangkok 10500 (Soi 41, Charoen Krung Rd.). ✆ **02659-9000.** Fax 02659-0000. www.mandarin-oriental.com. 393 units. $495 superior; from $706 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 8 restaurants; lounge; bar w/live jazz; airport transfers and ferry service; babysitting; kids' club; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa w/Ayurvedic treatments; squash court; 2 lit outdoor tennis courts; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, CD/DVD player, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

The Peninsula, Bangkok ★★★ From its exclusive top-floor lounge, right down to its velveteen lawns at ground level, the Peninsula proves it is as classy as the rest. Located on the western banks of the river in Thonburi, it benefits from more dramatic views up and downstream than its nearby competitor The Mandarin Oriental. Its oversized rooms are luxurious, with all the amenities one expects of a five-star. Rooms reflect the perfect marriage of Thai tradition and high-tech luxury, with wooden paneling, silk wallpaper, and thick carpets. The large marble bathrooms have separate vanity counters and a large tub with a hands-free telephone and TV monitor built in. State-of-the-art business services and great shopping attract leisure and business guests alike, while the Peninsula Spa by ESPA, in a delightfully restored colonial-style house, is the perfect place to unwind. Guests can sign up to be part of the Peninsula Academy, which features Thai cooking classes.

333 Charoen Nakhorn Rd., Klongsan, Bangkok 10600. ✆ **800/2828-3888** or 02861-2888. www.peninsula.com. 370 units. 13,000B superior double; 14,000B deluxe; from 20,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, CD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa ★★★ Kids Choose the Bangkok Marriott if you want to explore Bangkok and, at the same time, escape it. On the western banks of the

Chao Phraya River and a few miles downstream from the heart of old Bangkok, this sprawling resort is accessed by shuttle boat or taxi. Some don't like to be so far removed, but most find the short departure from crazy Bangkok a real relief; once at the resort, the big city seems a distant memory. The three wings of the hotel surround a large landscaped pool area with lily ponds and fountains, and there is a Mandara Spa to soothe one's spirits. Recreation, dining, and drinking choices are many, including such familiar restaurants as Trader Vic's and Benihana, as well as their popular Riverside Terrace restaurant, with a nightly buffet and culture show (see the "Dinner with Thai Dance" section, under "Where to Dine").

257 Charoen Nakhon Rd., Bangkok 10600. ✆ **800/060-888** or 02476-0022. Fax 02476-1120. www.marriotthotels.com. 413 units. 5,900B deluxe; 8,500B junior suite; 10,000B deluxe suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Ferry to Central Pier. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; bar and lounge; dinner cruise; airport transfers; babysitting; kids' club and programs; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; 2 outdoor lit tennis courts; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Millennium Hilton ★★ Towering 32 stories over the west bank of the Chao Phraya River, the Millennium Hilton offers a stiff challenge to other riverside hotels with its fantastic views and comprehensive facilities. The infinity pool on the fourth floor and the Three Sixty Lounge on the top floor are particularly fine spots from which to admire the cityscape, and there are several restaurants to choose from. Rooms and suites are comfortably furnished and all have Internet connections. When it's time for sightseeing, a shuttle boat is on hand to take guests across river to the Saphan Taksin BTS or to the River City shopping center.

123 Charoennakorn Rd., Bangkok 10600. ✆ **02442-2000.** Fax 02442-2020. www1.hilton.com. 543 units. 6,200B–8,000B double; from 8,500B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Shuttle boat from Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; cafe; babysitting; fitness room; outdoor pool; spa. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, high-speed Internet.

Montien Riverside Hotel ★ (Value) Located just off Rama III road, with easy access to highways to both airports, this towering edifice may not be a beauty but has great river views and, if you book on the Internet, it offers an excellent value. Appealing to those who want to kick back at the end of their Thailand stay, it may not be centrally located, but offers great facilities and a free hourly shuttle bus to the downtown Montien Hotel, on Silom Road, for shopping. The deep-carpeted rooms are comfortably furnished, and some have great river views; executive rooms come with butler service.

372 Rama 3 Rd., Bangkhlo, Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02292-2999.** Fax 02292-2962. www.montien.com. 462 units. 6,000B double, 12,000B suite. MC, V. Taxi from Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 3 bars; dinner cruise; fitness center w/sauna; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; 2 outdoor tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Shangri-La Hotel ★★★ The big, brassy Shangri-La, on the banks of the Chao Phraya, boasts acres of polished marble and a jungle of tropical plants and flowers surrounding the resort-style pool. Rooms are in two connecting wings, both with river views; the newer Krung Thep Wing has slightly smarter rooms and suites and offers butler service. All rooms have elegant teak furniture and marble bathrooms. The views are better from the higher-floor deluxe rooms; some have either a balcony or a small sitting room, making them closer to junior suites—and a good value. The level of service and facilities is good and the stylishly contemporary Chi spa is superb. Underneath the Krung Thep Wing is the riverside swimming pool, and beyond, a large indoor-outdoor breakfast lounge. The hotel offers sunset river cruises on the *Horizon,* a large motor cruiser equipped with live bands and broad outdoor decks.

89 Soi Wat Suan Plu, Charoen Krung Rd. (New Rd.), Bangkok 10500 (adjacent to Sathorn Bridge). ✆ **800/060-020** or 02236-7777. Fax 02236-8579. www.shangri-la.com. 799 units. From 7,800B double; from 10,500B executive suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; bar; dinner cruise; airport transfers; executive floors; fitness center w/aerobics classes; 2 outdoor pools w/outdoor Jacuzzi; room service; spa; 2 squash courts; 2 outdoor lit tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

Arun Residence ★★ Value This cool little arty hideaway comes with split-level suites, decorated in a colorful, unfussy, Thai-retro style, all with great views across to its eponymous *wat* (temple). It's suited to those who want to feel at home in the thick of old Bangkok, as it's close to major sites. Though public transport isn't on your doorstep, the twinkling river is right there in front of you, and the property's lush plants and sun-filled lounge offer a uniquely Thai experience.

36–38 Soi Phratu Nokyung (Tha Maharaj), Maharaj Rd., Rattanakosin Island, Bangkok 10200. ✆ **02221-9158.** Fax 02221-4493. www.arunresidence.com. 6 units. 3,500B standard; 5,500B suite with roof garden. AE, MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Ibrik Resort ★★ Pronounced "Eye-breek," this petite contemporary home, situated in Thonburi—a historic district where the first royal palace stood—is billed as a "resort by the river" but is more like a private home. Hidden in a narrow *soi,* its three bright, stylish rooms are all smoke free, with balconies overlooking the water. Its boutique size, small cafe, and location a few meters from the historic Wat Rakang make it popular with return visitors who want to explore more of the "real" Bangkok. Opposite is the Patravadi cafe and contemporary dance theater, and next door is Studio 9, a venue for weekend Thai dinner dances.

256 Soi Wat Rakang, Arunamarin Rd., Bangkoknoi, Bangkok 10700. ✆ **02848-9220.** Fax 02866-2978. www.ibrikresort.com. 3 units. 4,000B. MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Cafe. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Bossotel Inn Value A convenient 5-minute walk to Saphan Taksin BTS, this basic, cheap, and cheerful option attracts Thailand's many budget travelers. Most rooms are large but very basic, and the furniture and decor fairly monotone. With the higher grade rooms, things get a bit brighter—and there's Wi-Fi throughout. You'll find the staff helpful, but some have limited English. Ask about discount rates for longer stays.

55/8–14 Soi Charoen Krung 42/1, Bangrak, Bangkok 10500 (on Soi 42, near Shangri-La Hotel). ✆ **02630-6120.** Fax 02630-6129. www.bossotelinn.com. 81 units. 1,800B–2,600B double; 4,500B suite. AE, MC, V. Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

SATHORN, SILOM & SURAWONG

If Bangkok were to have one single business district (it actually has many), this would be it. The area between Surawong (also written Surawongse) and Silom roads contains the city's oldest shopping and tourist haunts—including the former G.I. haunt and today's red-light district, Patpong. Parallel to them is the busy eight-lane Sathorn Road, off which you'll find the city's bigger embassies, top hotels, police, and immigration HQs. Some hotels in *sois* off Sathorn (such as The Tivoli) even offer a shuttle to the Sala Daeng BTS. The one problem with this area is that it snarls up with static traffic every evening, but the Lumphini MRT stop at the top of Sathorn Road helps avoid the gridlock.

Very Expensive

The Banyan Tree ★★★ This immense all-suite skyscraper hidden behind Thai Wah Tower provides the city's most exceptional panoramas, a plethora of trendy dining venues, and a chic spa with spacious suites (including segregated wet-rooms for thalassotherapy treatments). While the brown, gold, and black lobby decor indicates its five-star status, Banyan Tree has a relaxed, resort ambience throughout its public areas, highlighting its claim to provide a slick, urban resort in the city. Pier 59 and Vertigo are just two of its popular, upscale dining options; both come with great views, and the latter offers alfresco dining on the vertiginous roof. Feast on Chinese dim sum galore at Bai Yun, or sip champagne under the stars at Moon Bar. Given its stellar reputation in Asia, the skyscraper hotel is popular with Asian families and tour groups. Mention the Thai Wah building right out in front to ensure your taxi doesn't miss the theatrical torch-lit entrance; it's on a busy one-way highway.

21/100 S. Sathorn Rd., Sathorn, Pathumwan, Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02679-1200.** Fax 02679-1199. www.banyantree.com. 327 units. From 10,000B deluxe-view suite; 90,000B presidential suite. AE, MC, V. Lumphini MRT. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 4 bars; lounge; airport transfers; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

The Metropolitan ★★ From the moment you step into the hushed lobby with its minimalist decor, this superhip residence engulfs its guests in a restful mood, despite being hemmed in by a cluster of towers on busy Sathorn Road. Staff are extremely friendly and helpful, and the rooms, while not huge, are equipped with the latest gadgets such as flatscreen TVs, DVD players, and broadband Internet connections. If you feel frazzled after a hectic day's sightseeing, head for the spa and indulge in the signature COMO Shambala massage. This will leave you lightheaded and ready to partake of the wholesome food on offer at Glow restaurant, which is low in calories but high in taste. At night, enjoy a cocktail in the Met Bar, exclusively for the use of hotel guests and members, where DJs spin eclectic lounge sounds.

27 S. Sathorn Rd., Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02625-3333.** Fax 02625-3300. www.metropolitan.bangkok.como.bz. 171 units. From 9,100B double; from 14,700B suite. AE, MC, V. Lumphini MRT. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; club; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, hair dryer, Wi-Fi, yoga mat.

The Sukhothai ★★★ Inside the Sukhothai, visitors find peaceful serenity and privacy, thanks to American designer Ed Tuttle's eclectic eye. This hip hotel is a maze of low pavilions, pools, and courtyards, deftly combining crisp, contemporary lines with Thai objets d'art, Thai silks, and rich tones. Colonnaded corridors surround lotus pools adorned with serried brick *chedis;* the terra-cotta friezes and the celadon ceramics are all motifs borrowed from its namesake city. Expansive guest rooms carry fine silk walls, mellow teak furniture, and rustic floor tiles; all have double bathrooms with oversize bathtubs, a separate shower, and toilet. Most rooms have personal fax machines and Internet connections. The hotel's Thai restaurant, Celadon, is well established, while the modern La Scala is more relaxed (that is, until you see the bill). The small gym is a popular appendage for its delightful dark-tile pool, meters away.

13/3 S. Sathorn Rd., Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02344-8888.** Fax 02344-8899. www.sukhothai.com. 210 units. 10,000B double; 14,000B executive suite; 19,000B garden suite; 82,000B Sukhothai suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Lumphini MRT. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar; lobby lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center w/aerobics classes; outdoor pool; room service; spa; squash court; outdoor lit tennis court. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

The Dusit Thani ★★ Once upon a time this was Bangkok's grandest address (and tallest building). Now this old girl just across from Lumphini Park—close to the BTS and the Rama IV flyover—has undergone an extensive renovation to bring her in line with her flashy new neighbors. Despite the traffic jams in the area, the hotel still has one of the best locations in the city. The large outdoor pool is surrounded by foliage, providing a great escape after a day of sightseeing. Rooms, though smaller than most in this category, come with balconies, built-in blonde wood paneling, and low lighting, plus views over the teeming intersection and park. The hotel chain's Devarana Spa, tucked upstairs behind the hotel's restaurants, has wowed spa aficionados with its superbly Thai-style double suites and stellar treatments.

946 Rama IV Rd., Bangkok 10500. ✆ **02200-9000.** Fax 02236-6400. www.dusit.com. 517 units. From 5,000B double; from 9,300B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Sala Daeng BTS. **Amenities:** 8 restaurants; lounge; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; driving range and golf school; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Le Bua at State Tower ★★★ Occupying the 64-story State Tower (easily spotted from afar by its gilded dome), this stylish property is run by the same company responsible for the Dome's plethora of superstylish dining joints, upstairs in the same building. Stunningly spacious one-, two-, and three-bedroom suites are wholly contemporary, decked out in icy white, deep brown, and steel hues. The larger suites come with fully equipped kitchenettes, washing machines, and large sitting areas. The tempting balconies sadly cannot be accessed, but the seafood restaurant, Breeze, with a spectacular outdoor setting and views, makes up for it; while the Sky Bar, on the 63rd floor, is ideal for a sundowner. The Ocean 52 restaurant serves dim sum to die for, but be prepared for prices as high as the building; Café Mozu is a more reasonable bet. There's an outdoor pool and a decent gym, plus lots more great dining or drinking options, literally right up to the roof at the Dome.

1055 Silom Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok 10500 (on the corner of Silom and Charoen Krung rds.). ✆ **02624-9999.** Fax 02624-9998. www.lebua.com/bangkok. 358 units. 8,200B–32,000B 1- to 3-bedroom suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Saphan Taksin BTS. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar; lounge; airport transfers; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Siri Sathorn ★ Finds Officially, this gorgeously contemporary apartment hotel is for long-stay guests, but those in the know can get day rates. It's managed by the same folks who own the Sukhothai Hotel, and it boasts a similar spacious, pared-down designer chic that mimics New York–loft-style living. All suites have fully equipped kitchens, smooth wood, and stone floors; some come with superb terraces and most have tubs. There's a very cool bar and small diner downstairs, next to a private dining room, and a few meeting rooms too, for busy executives. The small pool is shady, and the gym and yoga room is bright and clean. The friendliness of the staff outweighs the sometimes iffy service. Considering the quality and size of accommodations, rates are a bargain, and the location, in the quiet, tree-lined *soi* Sala Daeng 1 means you're just a short walk to Silom Road and the Sala Daeng BTS.

27 Soi Sala Daeng 1, Silom Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok 10500 (btw. Sathorn and Silom rds.). ✆ **02266-2345.** Fax 02267-5555. www.sirisathorn.com. 111 units. 6,000B 1-bedroom suite; 10,000B 2-bedroom suite; 12,000B 2-bedroom deluxe suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Sala Daeng BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; children's play area; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, CD player, fridge, hair dryer, full kitchen, minibar.

Sofitel Silom Bangkok ★★ As with most hotels that mix business and leisure guests, this swish venue is pleasantly modern and relatively efficient, though it perhaps offers more functional luxury than the opulence of the city's other well-known brands. Its location avoids the heady chaos of upper Silom Road and the Patpong area, but is not too far, if you don't mind what can be a fume-filled walk. Chic, contemporary Thai-style rooms are fitted with dark wood; rich, striped textiles; and clean, minimalist lines. Bathrooms are large, with a separate shower and bathtub and slick granite counters. The 35th floor opened in 2007, with flashier rooms, executive amenities, and, of course, great views. Executive services are fairly good, and it is one of very few hotels with a foreign-run (French) hair salon on the fifth floor. The small Anne Semonin spa is a bonus for women who love luxury facials.

188 Silom Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok 10500 (50m/164 ft. from the Silom and Narathiwat Rd. intersection). ✆ **02238-1991.** Fax 02238-1999. www.sofitel.com. 469 units. From 4,000B double; from 9,500B suite. Seasonal discounts offered. AE, MC, V. Chong Nonsi BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; airport transfers; fitness center; pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

Luxx ★★ Just around the corner from Sofitel Silom is a tiny boutique property that has completely remodeled itself within a narrow, 1970s facade. This contemporary hideaway is the new face of Bangkok; its fashionably minimalist size and prime location appeal to the young and style conscious. Within walking distance of Silom's shops and night market, but off the busy main drag of Silom, Luxx provides large airy rooms, flatscreen TVs, wooden barrel tubs, rain showers, and pebble gardens in an eclectic mix of Thai-Zen minimalism. Such perks as Wi-Fi, iPod docks, and breakfast in bed confidently affirm its claims to evoke a "home away from home" feel.

6/11 Soi Decho, off Silom Rd., Bangkok 10500 (30m/164 ft. from Silom). ✆ **02635-8800.** Fax 02635-8088. www.staywithluxx.com. 13 units. 2,200B double, 4,100B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Chong Nonsi BTS. **Amenities:** Room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, fridge, iPod docking station, minibar.

Narai Hotel and 222 (Triple Two) ★ This hotel duo is found 15 minutes' walk from Chong Nonsi BTS. The larger, much-older Narai Hotel is a clean, comfortable standard hotel, popular with tour groups. There is nothing particularly stylish about the lobby, but rooms are adequate, everything works, and service is amenable. Downstairs is the swish Italian restaurant and just next door is their sister venture, the newer and much smaller Triple Two (referring to its Silom Rd. address), which shares its pool and fitness facilities. Rooms here come with a sleek, contemporary look, with silk furnishings and traditional Thai fixtures that provide a gentle contrast to the ultramodern lines. Triple Two's indoor-outdoor downstairs dining venue is sadly overshadowed by constant traffic noise and fumes, but Silom Road offers lots of alternative shopping and dining options.

Narai Hotel: 222 Silom Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok 10500. ✆ **02237-0100.** Fax 02236-7161. www.naraihotel.co.th. 474 units. From 3,000B double; from 4,000B suite. AE, MC, V. Chong Nonsi BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; lounge; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar. **Triple Two Silom:** 222 Silom Rd., Bangrak, Bangkok 10500. ✆ **02627-2222.** Fax 02627-2300. www.tripletwosilom.com. 75 units. 4,800B double; 5,500B suite. AE, MC, V. Chong Nonsi BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, fridge, minibar.

Swiss Lodge ★ Just a short skip down Convent Road (off Silom Rd.), near the Sala Daeng BTS, is this cozy, convenient hotel. Swiss Lodge started out as a small guesthouse and is now a popular choice for business folks (many Europeans on long-stay) and travelers. Though it's near the red-light district of Patpong, there's no sleazy vibe to the place,

and the front desk staff is friendly. Rooms are large and quite plain, with simple furnishings; but everything is clean, and there are lots of good amenities (including in-room Wi-Fi). They have a good restaurant with daily buffet, and the swimming pool is but a postage stamp, but not a bad escape.

3 Convent Rd., Silom, Bangkok 10500. ✆ **02233-5345.** Fax 02236-9425. www.swisslodge.com. 46 units. 3,800B superior; 4,150B deluxe; 5,000B suite. AE, MC, V. Sala Daeng BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Silom Convent Garden ★★ Value With an excellent central location, this apartment-cum-hotel is suited for longer stays or short stints (day, weekly, monthly, or yearly rates are offered accordingly), and all rates include breakfast. Rooms are clean, bright, and contemporary, and come with the added bonus of being equipped with kitchenettes and communal laundry facilities, while being just a few paces from Soi Convent and busy Sathorn Road. The petite building is decked out in bright colors and showcases good taste. Long-stays warrant a bit of haggling, but prices remain incredibly affordable (as long as you ensure the electricity charges do not come with a hefty surcharge). Check the website for deals.

35/1 Soi Piphat 2, Convent Rd., Bangkok 10500. ✆ **02667-0130.** Fax 02667-0144. www.silomconvent garden.com. 44 units. Daily rates 2,000B double, 4,800B suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Sala Daeng BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, kitchenette.

The Tivoli ★★ Finds The tiny Tivoli outdoes the competition. This wonderfully friendly, midsize hotel is set some way back from the fumes and traffic of Sathorn Road (and also accessible via Rama IV). Unusually, The Tivoli offers different rates for both single and double rooms, but all are superbly decorated in a contemporary Thai style and offer exceptional value. The hotel helpfully provides a free tuk-tuk to those guests heading to the shops, renewing a visa at immigration HQ, or seeing a doctor at nearby BNH hospital. It's a 5-minute ride to the Lumphini MRT station and an 8-minute ride to Silom in good traffic. Few Bangkok hotels of this range offer this luxury and service standard, plus the bonus of a rooftop swimming pool and spa.

71/2–3 Soi Sri Bumphen, Yen-Arkart Rd., Thungmahamek, Sathorn, Bangkok 10120. ✆ **02249-5858.** Fax 02249-5818. www.thetivolihotelbangkok.com. 133 units. 2,000B double, 7,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Sala Daeng BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, fridge, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

SUKHUMVIT ROAD AREA

Accessed along its entire length by the convenient BTS, Sukhumvit Road is the heart of commercial Bangkok. Here you'll find many of the town's finest large shopping complexes and restaurants, as well as busy streetside shopping and dining stalls. Many businesses line this endless thoroughfare, and the small lanes, or *sois,* are crammed with bars and clubs—not all of them tacky hooker joints. Tourists as well as business travelers will find this the most convenient location to stay in town, with many comfortable hotel options. There are a few good budget choices (which are much better than busy and inconvenient Khao San Rd.), and direct access to the BTS means you can get anywhere you need to go in town at any time of day—which is a bonus when gridlock strikes.

Note: Siam (pronounced *See-yam*) BTS lies at the heart of the Rajadaprasong shopping area. Covered walkways link it to a number of Bangkok's larger and swankier malls, but sadly there are few elevators for wheelchairs or baby strollers.

ACCOMMODATIONS ■

The Atlanta **1**
Amari Boulevard Hotel **3**
City Lodge **4**
Dream Bangkok **10**
The Eugenia **19**
Grand President **8**
JW Marriott **2**
Refill Now **24**
Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit **13**
Suk 11 Guesthouse **6**
Westin Grande Sukhumvit **14**

DINING ◆

Baan Khanitha **17**
Bed Supper Club **5**
Cabbages & Condoms **12**
Crepes & Co **11**
Dosa King **16**
Govinda **20**
Kuppa **18**
Le Banyan **9**
Lemongrass **21**
Mrs Balbir's **7**
New York Steakhouse **2**
Seafood Market **22**
Shin Daikoku **15**
Vientiane Kitchen **23**

Expensive

Amari Boulevard Hotel ★★ Set back from the heaving sidewalks of Sukhumvit, the Amari is an upscale option that caters well to businessmen and tourists alike. This well-known triangular-shaped landmark sits like a wedge of cheese right in the heart of the busy bar and red-light district known as Nana, off Sukhumvit Road. Wide-ranging shopping and dining options are on your doorstep here, but the late-night sleaze of the surrounding *sois* may put off families—in which case, check out the posher **Amari Watergate** (✆ **02653-9000**), a 10-minute drive away. Inside, the Amari Boulevard is a world away from Sukhumvit Road's seedier side. Nicely furnished, its rooms—albeit average size—have sunny color schemes and pleasant touches such as elegant Thai handicrafts and bits of teak wood. Deluxe rooms afford a few more luxuries such as a separate bathtub and shower and DVD players. There's Wi-Fi in the lobby and friendly staff.

2 Soi 5, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02255-2930.** Fax 02255-2950. www.amari.com/boulevard. 309 units. From 6,000B double; 13,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Nana BTS. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Conrad Bangkok ★★★ On Witthayu (Wireless) Road, just a few doors down from the U.S. Embassy's Consular section, this fashionable high-rise springs out of the smart All Seasons Place complex, cluttered with expensive shops and fast-food outlets. When it opened, Conrad was Bangkok's hippest house of style, with then unheard-of luxuries such as Wi-Fi throughout. It still boasts an elegant medley of contemporary styles and confidently chic decor (though now most other hotels in the area can say the same). Interiors are decked out in rich, earthy colors. Rooms are furnished with pretty artwork and faux antiques, and offer every modern convenience. Bathrooms have freestanding tubs with flatscreen TVs. Service is sleek and professional. A spa and beautiful pool terrace give a sense of serenity and the restaurants are all top class. The hotel is also home to two of the city's trendiest nightspots—the Diplomat Bar, with live jazz, and Club 87 Plus.

87 Witthayu (Wireless) Rd., Bangkok 10330. ✆ **02690-9999.** Fax 02690-9000. http://conradhotels1.hilton.com. 391 units. From 7,800B double; 14,200B executive suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Chit Lom BTS. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; bar; club; executive floor; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; 2 outdoor lit tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Dream Bangkok ★ This addition to the burgeoning hotel scene along Sukhumvit Road is at the cutting edge of modern style—indigo lights in the corridor and under-bed lighting create a true dreamlike aura. Just in case you're not ready to sleep, rooms are also equipped with large plasma TVs and high-speed Internet connections. Dining and drinking choices follow the stylish theme, with innovative dishes on the menu at Flava Restaurant and unusual cocktails in the Flava Lounge. There are also a gym and spa on the premises to help guests keep trim.

10 Sukhumvit Soi 15, Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02254-8500.** Fax 02254-8534. www.dreambkk.com. 195 units. 4,800B–5,400B double; 7,200B–24,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Asok BTS or Sukhumvit MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; gym; outdoor pool; spa. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

The Eugenia ★★ Nostalgia is the name of the game at the Eugenia, which has just a dozen suites that are full of character in a renovated colonial building. Rooms are equipped with period furnishings and many of them have four-poster beds. The sun loungers by the pool, the Jaguars sitting in the garage, the gourmet food served in the

D.B. Bradley dining room (named after a 19th-century American missionary), and afternoon tea in the Zheng He lounge (named after a great Chinese seafarer) are effective in captivating guests and transporting them to a bygone era.

267 Sukhumvit Soi 31, Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02259-90119.** Fax 02259-9010. www.theeugenia.com. 12 units. 5,800B–7,200B suite. AE, MC, V. Phrom Phong BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C.

The Four Seasons, Bangkok ★★★ The Four Seasons, Bangkok (formerly The Regent) is a smart, well-appointed low-rise property. The entrance and lobby are overwhelming, with a sweeping staircase adorned with giant Thai murals and detailed gold paint work on the high ceilings. The impeccable service begins at the threshold, and an air of luxury pervades the urban resort. Rooms are spacious and feature handsome color schemes and plush carpeted dressing areas next to the large bathroom area. The more expensive rooms have a view of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club racetrack or pool. Cabana Rooms face the large pool and terrace area, which is filled with palms, lotus ponds, and tropical greenery. The Four Seasons' dining is exemplary, especially at Shintaro and Biscotti (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter). Plus, the concierge service is second to none in Asia. Close to the center of town and the Ratchadamri BTS, it's a real hideaway (despite the constant construction in the area).

155 Ratchadamri Rd., Bangkok 10330. ✆ **02126-8832.** Fax 02253-9195. www.fourseasons.com. 353 units. From 6,950B superior; 10,700B deluxe; 11,400B deluxe view; 22,000B cabana; from 25,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Ratchadamri BTS. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge w/live music; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; pool; room service; spa, Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, hair dryer, minibar.

Grand Hyatt Erawan ★★★ Where, in the 1970s, the former Erawan Hotel famously stood, the hulking white Grand Hyatt now stands. It enjoys a great central (if smog-bound) location, though pool loungers and residents of the delightful spa cottages are regularly looked over by commuters on the BTS. The hotel's design epitomizes the glamour and exuberance of the 1980s, with giant columns and staircases reminiscent of the TV show *Dynasty.* The lobby (which has Wi-Fi), with its lush indoor landscaping, is a cool contrast to the throbbing noise outside on the city's busiest intersection. Spacious rooms are decked out in delightful silks, celadon ceramics, pseudoantique furnishings, and parquet floors. The bathrooms are equally generous, and city views abound. The excellent spa occupies an entire floor, while next door is the opulent Erawan shopping center (p. 139) and the glittering Erawan Shrine (p. 128).

494 Ratchadamri Rd., Bangkok 10330 (corner of Rama I Rd.). ✆ **800/492-8804** or 02254-1234. Fax 02254-6308. www.bangkok.grand.hyatt.com. 380 units. 7,200B–9,900B double; from 13,700B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Phloen Chit BTS. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lounge; club; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

InterContinental Hotel ★★ With an advantageous location near Chit Lom BTS and downtown shopping malls, such as Gaysorn and CentralWorld, the InterCon is oft overlooked but well worth a try, if you wish to be close to the key shops and don't mind fighting daily gridlock at the Rama I intersection. It's also next to its lower-end sister property, Holiday Inn. Enclosed in a glass-and-steel tower, rooms are decked out in swanky, high-end business hotel standards and come with unobstructed views of the seething city. If you can pay the executive-floor rates, you get perks such as free broadband Internet and high tea. It's a good choice for shoppers; within a 10-minutes walk lie nine of the city's most popular malls; and if that's not enough, the gigantic, labyrinthine

Pathumwan Market is 5 minutes away, for the truly adventurous (and nonclaustrophobic) bargain hunters.

973 Ploenchit Rd., Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330. ✆ **800/656-888** or 02656-0444. Fax 02656-0555. www.intercontinental.com. 381 units. From 4,690B deluxe; from 7,630B corner suite; 9,170B Inter-Continental suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Chit Lom BTS. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; deli; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

JW Marriott ★★ JW Marriott's downtown hotel is a huge, black marble hive of action, with great eats, a fine spa, and unparalleled convenience. Business travelers love it for its extensive executive services and efficient staff, but it tends to be emptier over the year-end holidays—giving vacationers an opportunity to enjoy its luxuries without paying a premium. Close as it is to shopping along Sukhumvit Road and to the Nana BTS, Marriott's drawback is that it's slap bang in the heart of the go-go club zone, which attracts drunk or unsavory characters late at night. The health club is popular, with a pleasant outdoor pool that lends an urban oasis feel. Rooms are tastefully upmarket, with famously soft beds, handy desk space, and large marble bathrooms with a separate shower and large bathtub. Suites are vast. A bonus is the fact that the tollway serving both Bangkok airports is right on the doorstep.

4 Sukhumvit Soi 2, Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02656-7700.** Fax 02656-7711. www.marriott.com. 402 units. Double from 5,800B; 60,000B royal suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Nana BTS. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 3 bars; babysitting; executive floor; health club; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit ★★★ Be sure to get the name of this Sukhumvit Road behemoth exactly right. (The Royal Orchid Sheraton is miles away, on the river.) This is one of two Starwood properties (see the Westin, below), both close to the Asok BTS. However, this is by far the most luxurious and efficient of the two. There is a certain formulaic quality to the Sheraton, but it is a high-end formula that's extremely comfortable and familiar. Each room has great amenities, and the height gives it superb views. There is a renowned spa downstairs with top-notch wraps and hydrotherapy. The beautiful 10th-floor lagoon pool looks as if it's set in a jungle. The Sheraton Grande's style places it firmly upmarket and comes with some high-end dining choices that suit businesspeople—but may not always fall within tourist budgets. Popular ground-floor BarSu has regular live acts, while the third-floor Living Room hums with jazz nightly.

250 Sukhumvit Rd. (btw. *sois* 12 and 14), Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02649-8888.** Fax 02649-8000. www.starwoodhotels.com/bangkok. 420 units. From 8,900B double; from 13,700B grande suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Asok BTS or Sukhumvit MRT. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Swissôtel Nai Lert Park ★★★ Kids Sitting in the verdant Nai Lert Park, this hotel is a great little inner-city oasis with four room types—including rooms decked out for those traveling with kids—and no less than six kinds of suites. Rooms are plush, with either classic or contemporary furnishings, and offer city or garden views from their sunny balconies. All have high-speed Internet access. Its gym, pool, and tennis courts all back onto leafy forest, and the Amrita Spa adds a touch of luxury. Its meeting rooms and ballroom make it a popular choice for regional business travelers and for large functions. The coolly revamped Syn bar is the talk of the town, and provides an enjoyable ambience. The hotel is on a busy one-way road that makes access to Sukhumvit Road difficult and time-consuming in traffic, but it's only a short, 8-minute walk from Nana BTS and CentralWorld Department Store.

2 Witthayu (Wireless) Rd., Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330. ✆ **02253-0123.** Fax 02253-6509. www.swissotel.com. 338 units. From 3,120B double; from 4,750B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Phloen Chit BTS. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; deli; 2 bars; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Westin Grande Sukhumvit ★★ Kids Across the street from the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, the much-renamed and renovated Westin begins on the seventh floor, above Robinson's department store. It's a more affordable choice, but perhaps not as posh as its sister property, with decent-size rooms and passable dining but no great views or glamour peeking through its urbane decor. The hotel's business services are of good standard, and the Club Floor rooms offer a few more benefits, such as Wi-Fi. Though it has nothing superior to that offered by its glamorous neighbor, the location of the Westin, plus its prices, give it the edge for tourists who'd rather save their dollars for shopping. BTS and MRT access at the nearby Asok intersection means that the city is at your disposal, and unlike the guests at Sheraton, you don't have to hike over a smog-filled overpass to get here.

259 Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02207-8000.** Fax 02255-2441. www.starwoodhotels.com. 362 units. From 5,800B deluxe; from 9,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Asok BTS or Sukhumvit MRT. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Moderate

Arnoma Hotel Bangkok ★ Arnoma is hardly a stylish option, but it's a convenient address for shoppers, though traffic (and pollution) at the busy Ratchadamri intersection is hideous at best. It's plunked right among the Rajadaprasong district's many shopping outlets; the gargantuan Zen and CentralWorld mall are opposite, and the posh Gaysorn, Erawan, and Siam Paragon malls are all within a few minutes' walk. Rooms are comfortable; the top five floors are termed business class and are slightly more modern and better appointed than the 1980s-style standard rooms below, but the rates are reasonable for this part of town. There are wheelchair-accessible rooms available on request, as well as smoke-free rooms (recommended). Light sleepers would do well to ask for a room away from the road. The place is busy, but the staff does well to cope.

99 Ratchadamri Rd., Pathumwan, Bangkok 10330. ✆ **02655-5555.** Fax 02655-7555. www.arnoma.com. 369 units. From 3,300B double; from 4,900B suite. AE, MC, V. Phloen Chit BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; pastry shop; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

City Lodge ★ Value Budget travelers will appreciate the two small, spiffy City Lodges that come under the Swiss-run Amari group's wing. The newer lodge on Soi 9 and its nearby cousin, the older (but better equipped and slightly pricier) 34-room City Lodge on Soi 19 (✆ **02253-7710;** fax 02255-7340; www.amari.com/citylodge19), provide pleasant, modern rooms. Each has its own pasta restaurant and a few frills, such as a DVD player and high-speed Internet (at Soi 19 only). A big bonus is the shared fitness and pool facilities available at the more deluxe Amari Boulevard Hotel, on Soi 5 (see above). Low-season discounts mean you can get good value for your money. Both hotels are very convenient for shopping, bars, and the Skytrain.

137/1–3 Sukhumvit Soi 9, Bangkok 10110 (corner of Sukhumvit and Soi 9). ✆ **02253-7759.** Fax 02255-4667. www.amari.com/citylodge9. 28 units. 2,100B standard, 2,300B superior. MC, V. Nana or Asok BTS. **Amenities:** Cafe; babysitting; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Grand President ★★ Off the perennially popular Soi 11, close to Nana BTS, these serviced apartments, comprising three different wings, are a good midrange find for

families, singles, or those who like to be right in the thick of things without paying a premium. The Grand President's one-, two-, and three-bed studios and suites are geared up for long and short stays and offer small luxuries such as a fitness center and several swimming pools. Rooms are comfortable but rather worn at times, with good closet space, modern bathrooms with tubs, and the added bonus of kitchenettes equipped with microwave ovens, sinks, and giant fridges. The Royal Suite has a full kitchen and washing machine. The service is friendly, but not overly capable. The biggest disadvantage here (or advantage, depending on your perspective) is the proximity to bars, which mean the corridors are often noisy at night with drunken revelers returning home. Earplugs may be useful.

14–16, Soi 11, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02651-1200.** Fax 02651-1260. www.grandpresident.com. 437 units. 2,300B standard; 2,600B deluxe; from 3,400B deluxe suite; 6,500B family suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Nana BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; fitness center; 3 outdoor pools; sauna; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD player, fridge, kitchenette.

Novotel Bangkok ★★ This midrange Novotel lying in the thick of the Siam Square shopping area has been around for ages but manages to keep up appearances. The marble and glass lobby leads to an expansive lounge, complemented by soft sofas. Pastel tones carry over into relatively spacious rooms. Wi-Fi comes free for corporate guests, but others pay a small hourly or daily charge. If the more-than-adequate Chinese or international restaurants are beyond your budget, head outside, where there are a bevy of cheaper noodle shops and a variety of Western diners, from local pizza parlors to donut chains, filling up Siam Square's packed back streets. In contrast to the many five-stars close by, Novotel offers considerably lower prices. The hotel's facilities, including its busy bars, attract a mix of midrange travelers and executives, but the popular disco (famously) tends to attract a sleazier crowd.

Siam Square Soi 6, Bangkok 10330 (off Rama I Rd.). ✆ **02209-8888.** Fax 02255-1824. www.novotel.com. 429 units. From $90 double; from $130 junior suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Siam BTS. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 5 bars; club; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Inexpensive

The Atlanta These days, the crusty old concrete bunker known as The Atlanta has little by way of comfort; however, it does have character, most of it left over from 1952, when it first opened. This is Bangkok's self-proclaimed "bastion of culturally sensitive tourism," and though it is just around the corner from raunchy Nana Plaza, sex tourists are definitely not welcome. It claims to be the first hotel in Bangkok to have a swimming pool—and it looks very much as if it hasn't been renovated since. That said, the dining area does serve great Thai treats, and the hotel also features a small library and occasional film screenings of classic movies. Rooms are basic, with a choice of air-conditioning or fan (only A/C rooms have hot water). The sign NO COMPLAINTS AT THESE PRICES is for real, and if that kind of wit appeals, you'll find it charmingly eccentric. At the far end of Sukhumvit Soi 2, it's a hot hike to the Nana BTS.

78 Soi 2, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02252-6069.** Fax 02656-8123. www.theatlantahotelbangkok.com. 49 units. 700B double with fan; 800B double with A/C; suites from 950B. No credit cards. A 15-min. walk from Nana BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 outdoor pools; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C (in some units).

Refill Now ★ Finds A fun and friendly budget choice, this little upmarket backpackers' joint is a cool place, way above the rest. It's a bright, breezy find, with bunk beds and communal bathrooms, a cozy restaurant, and a lot more style than some of the

comparable budget options elsewhere. Though it's situated at the eastern end of town, it's within a 60B ride to Phra Khanong BTS, on Sukhumvit Road (just one stop east of Ekkamai Bus Station). Don't be put off that its location is off most maps. It's become a hip hangout, so book online, no matter what the season.

191 Soi Predi Bhanomyong 42, Yak 5, Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 71, Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02713-20446.** www.refillnow.co.th. 24 bunk beds, 8 private rooms. 490B bed in dormitory; 1,260B private twin. MC, V. Phra Khanong BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C.

Suk 11 Guesthouse Overrated The rusticated Suk 11 is modeled on a primitive wooden Thai house and provides convenient access to the Nana BTS. Because of its rock-bottom prices, this hostelry needs to be booked a minimum of 3 days ahead (use the website) and won't accept walk-ins. Rooms are basic, and service can be surly—it's as if they've had it too good for too long. There's a range of rooms, from singles with shared bathrooms to family rooms with en suite bathrooms, but walls in all are thin. Single and double rooms with en suite bathroom are the best bets. There are some quiet sitting areas and even a yoga room. Be warned that there are no elevators in this four-floor building, and if it's all a bit too basic for you, check out their smart serviced apartments, **Suk11@13,** on nearby Sukhumvit Soi 13 (same contact details), where there's a full-size pool, fitness center, and, predictably, higher prices (around 2,000B).

1/13 Soi Sukhumvit 11 (behind 7-Eleven), Bangkok 10110. ✆ **02253-5927.** Fax 02253-5929. www.suk11.com. 75 units. 500B single with shared facilities; 900B double with en suite bathroom; 1,200B triple. No credit cards except online. Nana BTS. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet; yoga room. *In room:* A/C.

BANGLAMPOO & KHAO SAN ROAD

This now-fast-gentrifying area still caters to a core clientele of budget backpackers, aging hippies, and drug-addled dropouts, which makes for noisy nighttimes in the cheaper guesthouses. It is slowly trying to court more midrange customers, though. Cheap eats and funky fashions abound here; so do thieves: Secure your room and valuables well. It is handy for visiting sights such as the Grand Palace and National Museum, but it's a long way from the Skytrain and subway, so getting around is a bit of a problem; most tourists hop on a river taxi to Saphan Taksin BTS.

Inexpensive

There are budget places from as low as 400B in and around Khao San, including the **Viengtai Hotel** (42 Rambutri Rd., Banglampoo; ✆ **02280-543445;** www.viengtaikhaosan.com), a rather spartan, battered enclave, but it has clean rooms, a pool, and good prices—just 1,800B to 3,300B a night.

Buddy Lodge ★ This is one of the area's best-known, smaller-size hotels providing upscale accommodations. Rates are higher than for the guesthouses for sure, but this brings a modicum of comfort, with facilities such as a spa, a rooftop pool, air-conditioning, TV, and, most of all, security. It can get pretty raucous in the echoing hallways, but all rooms are clean, with a pretty 1930s Thai rustic look, wicker furnishings, and comfy beds; some rooms have balconies. You can dine in their popular restaurant or feast in the many nearby eateries. There's also a mall right next door.

265 Khao San Rd., Bangkok 10200. ✆ **02629-4477.** Fax 02629-4744. www.buddylodge.com. 76 units. From 2,000B double. MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel De Moc ★ A great midsize budget option, this 1960s hotel is 10 minutes by taxi east of Khao San and just north of Klong Banglampoo. Run by Buddy Lodge (see

above), it provides 100 spick-and-span guest rooms with air-conditioning and small balconies overlooking a mostly residential area near Democracy Monument (from where the hotel takes its name). There are simple but good-quality room amenities, doubles and triples, marble bathrooms, and Wi-Fi, plus the added bonus of complimentary use of a daytime tuk-tuk shuttle to Khao San Road, as well as bikes and the gym at Buddy Lodge. Out back, there's a big concrete pool surrounded by trees. It's a world away from the swanky five-stars, but old-world charm rides high here nonetheless.

78 Prachathipatai Rd., Pra-Nakorn, Bangkok 10200. ✆ **02282-2831** or 02629-2100. Fax 02280-1299. www.hoteldemoc.com. 100 units. From 1,600B double. AE, MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Royal Hotel ★ Located on the broad Ratchadamnoen Avenue, this three-story brick colossus is a 5-minute walk to the Grand Palace, but rather isolated from other sites. As a result, the Royal is a great choice for budget travelers who find the crazies on Khao San to be too much and who don't mind a smattering of shabbiness among the 1950s polished floors, chandeliers, and Corinthian columns. The clean, kitschy rooms are spacious and comfortable. A small pool and buffet breakfast are added luxuries. Regular political rallies in nearby Sanam Luang can make it noisy, so choose a room at the back.

2 Ratchadamnoen Ave., Bangkok 10200 (2 blocks east of National Museum). ✆ **02222-9111.** Fax 02224-2083. 300 units. 1,800B double; from 4,000B suite. AE, MC, V. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; coffee shop; lobby bar; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

CHINATOWN

Yaowarat (Chinatown) is a cramped, pungent trip back in time, riddled with traffic jams and chaotic at best. But it's also one of the most fascinating mercantile districts of Old Bangkok, with great eats, sights, and color.

Moderate

Grand China Princess Hotel ★ Affordable and close to many attractions, this towering edifice peers down from 10 stories above, overshadowing the bustling shophouses and businesses of colorful Chinatown. Guest rooms are typical of a Chinese-style hotel, with all the useful amenities usually found in more expensive hotels, but without sparing Thai-style touches and character. Suites are especially large. The 25th floor features Bangkok's first revolving diner, with spectacular views over the city and Chao Phraya River.

215 Yaowarat Rd., Bangkok 10100. ✆ **02224-9977.** Fax 02224-7999. www.grandchina.com. 155 units. From 4,200B double; from 8,400B suite. AE, MC, V. Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; airport transfers; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Shanghai Mansion ★ This newish hotel is a small but superb example of some of Bangkok's more character-filled boutique hotels that are springing up. The average-size rooms (and slightly larger suites) are all eclectically furnished in a 1930s style, with vivid pink, green, and red silks, and Chinese lattice-frame beds, all evoking Old Shanghai. While they tend to be on the small side, rooms make up for it in color and ambience. The hotel offers only a few facilities, such as delicious Chinese teas and free Wi-Fi, but its sumptuous atmosphere far outstrips its better-equipped neighbors.

479 Yaowarat Rd., Bangkok 10100. ✆ **02221-2121.** Fax 02221-2124. www.shanghai-inn.com. 55 units. From 6,000B double; from 10,000B suite. AE, MC, V. Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Restaurant; library; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Chinatown Hotel ★ From the rather ugly exterior, you can tell the Chinatown Hotel is hardly going to be an architectural stunner, but behind the blue glass facade there are some decent, if diminutive, rooms, decorated to a fair level. The China Room has a microwave oven, and the suites are more spacious; though they lack any style, they are at least a good value. Amenities include high-speed Internet (for a fee). The facilities are few, but the public areas are well kept.

526 Yaowarat Rd., Bangkok 10100. ✆ **02225-0204.** Fax 02226-1295. www.chinatownhotel.co.th. 60 units. From 1,500B double; from 4,200B suite. MC, V. Hua Lamphong MRT. **Amenities:** Cafe; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

2 WHERE TO DINE

If you have tasted Thai food back home, it may not necessarily taste like the stuff you're about to try here. What you'll eat in Bangkok will (with any luck) be the real thing; be warned that many restaurants catering to foreigners in big resort towns adjust their Thai cuisine radically to cater to foreign palates. Happily, Bangkok offers many authentic choices, from simple noodle stands to sophisticated, upmarket joints. You don't have to limit your diet to Thai food either; the city is one of the best places in the world to dine out on international fare. Check the free listings magazines, such as ***BK Magazine,*** and you may even stumble across a visiting chef from an overseas Michelin-starred eatery making a quick visit to a five-star hotel or an annual food festival.

You will not go hungry in the Big Mango, and the truly adventurous will find interesting and more authentic fare off the beaten track in smaller roadside eateries. Prices vary from really rock-bottom-priced street food to unashamedly wallet-melting, posh new restaurants. But on the whole, menu costs are comparatively reasonable. You'll be able to eat well for around 1,000B for two, even at some of the town's better restaurants. (If you order wine, Thai taxes on good vintages mean you may double that figure, though.)

ON THE RIVER

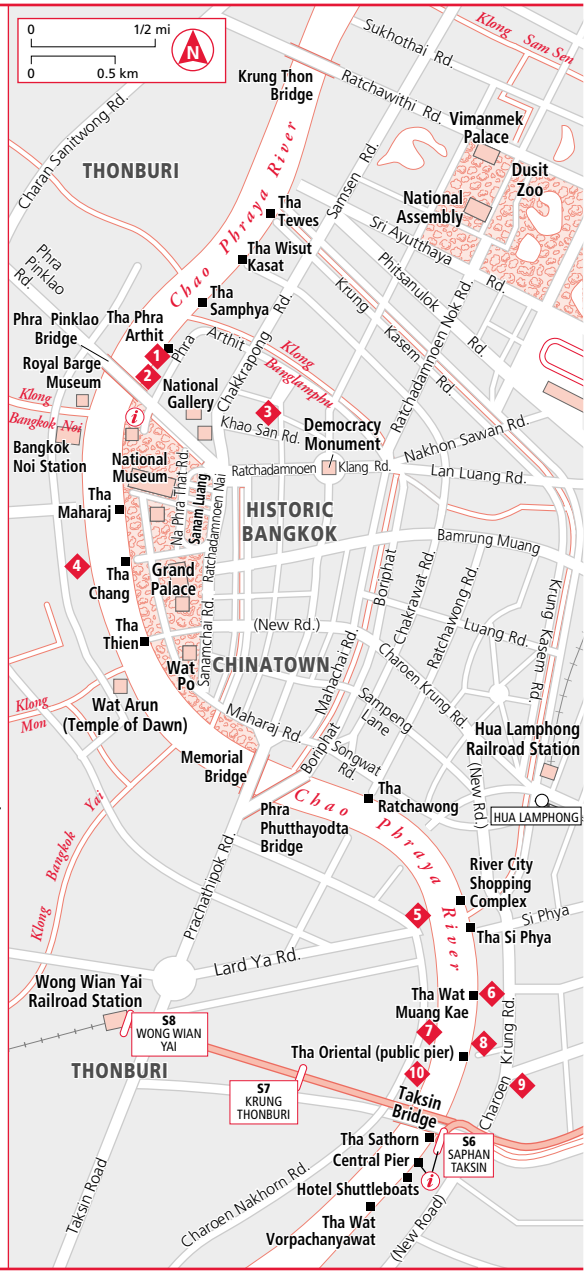
Very Expensive

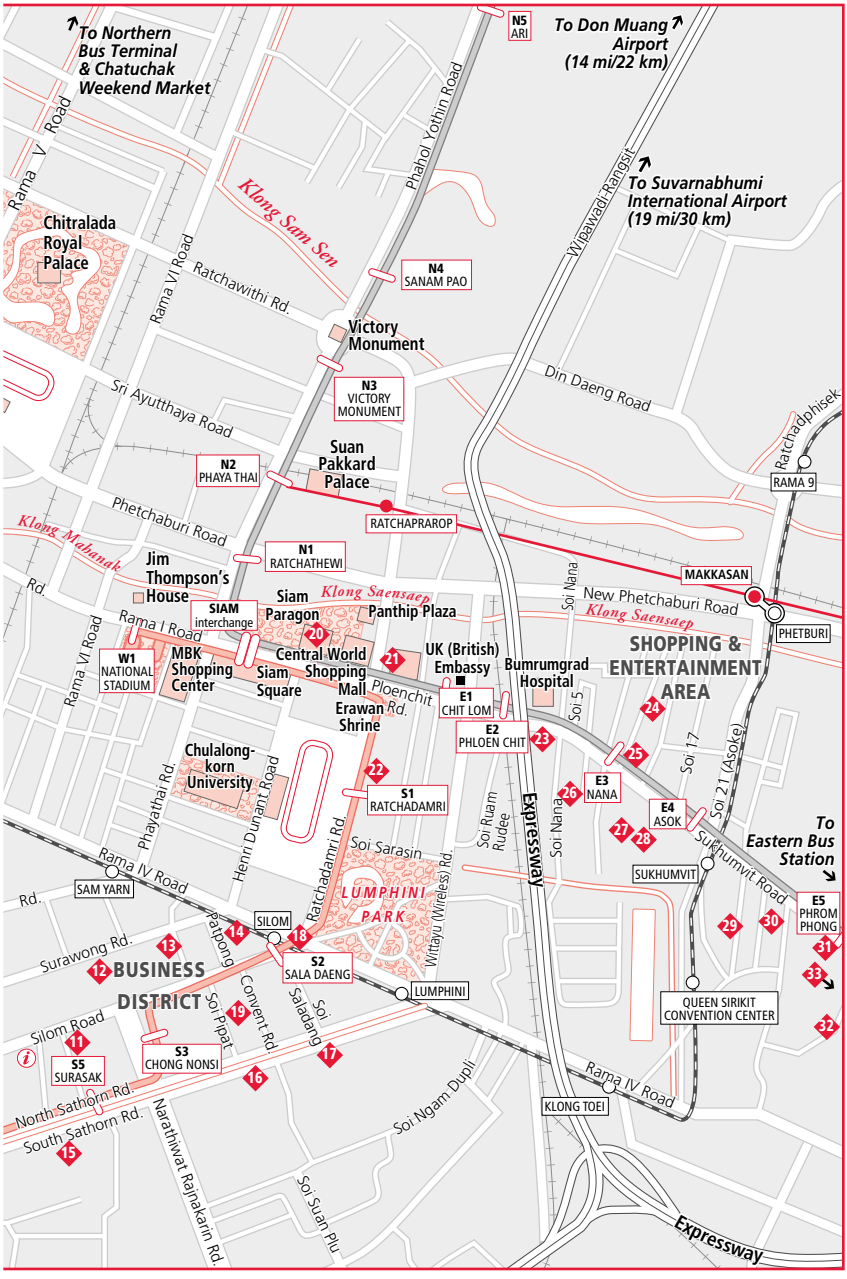
Le Normandie ★★★ FRENCH The Le Normandie is the apex of formal dining in Thailand, in both price and quality. The ultraelegant restaurant, atop the renowned Oriental Hotel, offers panoramic views of Thonburi and the Chao Phraya River. The dining room literally glistens, from place settings to chandeliers, and the warm tones of the butter-yellow silks impart a delicious glow. Some of the world's highest-ranked master chefs have made guest appearances here, adding their own unique touches to the various menus, all of which change regularly. Main courses such as Dover sole, sea bass, and rack of lamb are good examples of the diversity. The lunch set menu is one of the hotel's best-kept secrets—it can cost less than a main course. The service, as you might expect in such an establishment, is impeccable. If you want to indulge your sweet tooth, opt for the dessert tray on the a la carte menu. Wines of every caliber pepper the extensive wine list, but be prepared to splash out for the best.

The Oriental, Bangkok, 48 Oriental Ave. ✆ **02659-9000.** www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok. Reservations required at least 1 day in advance. Jacket required for men, no jeans or sports shoes. Main courses 1,600B–2,500B; special set lunch/supper menus 1,000B–1,900B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 7–10:30pm; closed Sun lunch. Ferry to Central Pier or Saphan Taksin BTS.

Where to Dine in Bangkok

Baan Khanitha **16**
The Barbican **14**
Bed Supper Club **24**
Benjarong **18**
Biscotti **22**
The Blue Elephant **15**
Breeze **9**
Cabbages & Condoms **28**
Crepes & Co **27**
Crystal Jade **20**
The Dome at State Tower **9**
Dosa King **25**
Eat Me **19**
Govinda **30**
Harmonique **6**
Hemlock **2**
Kuppa **29**
Le Banyan **26**
Le Bouchon **13**
Le Normandie **8**
Lemongrass **31**
May Kaidee's **3**
Mei Jiang **10**
Mrs Balbir's **25**
New York Steakhouse **23**
Pier 59 **17**
Sala Rim Nam **7**
Seafood Market **32**
Shin Daikoku **21**
Shintaro **19**
Somboon Seafood **12**
Studio 9 & Patravadi Theater **4**
Taling Pling **11**
Thiptara **10**
Ton Pho **1**
Vientiane Kitchen **33**
Yok Yor Klongsan & Yok Yor Marina **5**




To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
To Don Muang Airport (14 mi/22 km)
To Suvarnabhumi International Airport (19 mi/30 km)
Chitralada Royal Palace
Klong Sam Sen
Victory Monument
Suan Pakkard Palace
Jim Thompson's House
Siam Paragon
Panthip Plaza
Central World
Siam Square
MBK Shopping Center
UK (British) Embassy
Bumrungrad Hospital
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT AREA
Chulalongkorn University
LUMPHINI PARK
BUSINESS DISTRICT
QUEEN SIRIKIT CONVENTION CENTER
To Eastern Bus Station
Expressway
Rama IV Road
Phetchaburi Road
New Phetchaburi Road
Klong Saensaep
Klong Mahanak
Ratchadamri Rd.
Sukhumvit Road
Silom Road
Surawong Rd.
Sri Ayutthaya Road
Din Daeng Road
Ratchawithi Rd.
Rama VI Road
Phahol Yothin Road
Wipawadi Rangsit
Ratchadphisek
Soi Nana
Soi 5
Soi 17
Soi 21 (Asoke)
Soi Ruam Rudee
Soi Sarasin
Soi Ngam Duplee
Soi Suan Plu
Narathiwat Rajnakarin Rd.
North Sathorn Rd.
South Sathorn Rd.
Henri Dunant Road
Phayathai Rd.
Ploenchit Rd.
Erawan Shrine
Wittayu (Wireless) Rd.
Convent Rd.
Soi Saladaeng
Soi Pipat
Patpong
N1 RATCHATHEWI
N2 PHAYA THAI
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
N4 SANAM PAO
N5 ARI
RATCHAPRAROP
MAKKASAN
RAMA 9
PHETBURI
SIAM interchange
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHLOEN CHIT
E3 NANA
E4 ASOK
E5 PHROM PHONG
S1 RATCHADAMRI
S2 SALA DAENG
S3 CHONG NONSI
S5 SURASAK
SILOM
LUMPHINI
SAM YAN
SUKHUMVIT
KLONG TOEI
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33

Expensive

Mei Jiang ★★★ CHINESE In the plush lower level of the Peninsula lies a Chinese restaurant that serves fresh, unfussy Cantonese dim sum and superbly authentic regional specialties from the Chinese provinces of Guangzhou, Fujian, and Sichuan, not forgetting Northern classics, such as the succulent Beijing Duck, eaten with warm pancakes, sweet plum sauce, cucumber, and shallots. Elegantly simple Chinese decor that doesn't overwhelm and delightful private rooms give it an edge over the city's other—more showy—Chinese restaurants. As the dim sum selection attests, this place is all about quality. Reasonably priced set lunches (with dim sum) or set dinners make light work of a head-spinningly broad menu that includes (more extravagantly priced) Chinese delicacies such as lobster, Australian abalone, and sharks' fin. Don't overlook desserts such as chilled sago pudding, black sesame ice cream, or the wonderfully warming sesame paste dumplings in a spicy ginger tea.

The Peninsula, Bangkok, 333 Charoen Nakhorn Rd., Thonburi (overlooking the river). ✆ **02861-2888,** ext. 691. www.peninsula.com/Bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses (average) 500B–1,600B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm. Short ferry from Hotel Shuttle Boat Pier (next to Saphan Taksin BTS).

Thiptara ★★ Finds THAI This alfresco venue is set amid a pretty Thai garden with lotus ponds, goldfish pools, and individual, private wooden pavilions, all next to the Chao Phraya River. The menu includes both spicy and nonspicy Thai dishes, all of which carefully encapsulate the taste of simple home cooking. Try a refreshingly zesty pomelo salad with grilled prawns (mention it to the waitress, if you don't like it too spicy), or dip into a Thai-style duck curry or fresh seafood dishes. If you don't want to risk street eats and are dying to try some Thai classics, Thiptara offers the well-loved Thai-style noodle, *pad thai goong sod,* or *tom yum goong* (spicy coconut and prawn soup), as well as the addictive Thai dessert, mango and sticky rice. More adventurous diners can try the more unusual *pollamai nampheung,* a two-person dessert of Thai fruits roasted in honey with splashes of chili and vanilla, served with a refreshing lemon sorbet.

The Peninsula, Bangkok, 333 Charoen Nakhorn Rd., Thonburi. ✆ **02861-2888,** ext. 6930. www.peninsula.com/Bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses 360B–780B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–10:30pm. Short ferry from Hotel Shuttle Boat Pier (next to Saphan Taksin BTS).

Moderate

Harmonique ★★ THAI A popular tourist haunt, Harmonique is set in the courtyard of a century-old house that, despite the cramped space and unending clutter, oozes character. The entrance to this ramshackle eatery is via Wat Meung Kae. There is courtyard seating, as well as small open-air dining areas, stuffed with fun bric-a-brac and ephemera. The cuisine is Thai, tailored to Western tastes—the *tom yum* is delicious, served only as spicy as you like, and with enormous chunks of fish. The sizzling grilled seafood platter is nice and garlicky (with chilies on the side). They also feature good Western desserts, such as brownies, which are great with a cool tea on a hot day. This is a nice stop when you're touring the riverfront or visiting the antiques stores of nearby River City.

22 Charoen Krung (New) Rd., a few meters down Soi 34, on the right. ✆ **02630-6270.** Main courses 350B. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–10pm. Closed in summer. 20-min. walk from Saphan Taksin BTS.

Studio 9 & Patravadi Theatre Café ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Studio 9 provides the adjoining theater complex with a smart little eatery right on the water, with tables overlooking the Grand Palace on the opposite bank. Come over the weekend for

the evening contemporary dance–dinner shows (p. 118), or just pop in after a performance at the Patravadi Theatre, for a quick bite and glass of wine. The very reasonably priced menu leans toward Thai-fusion fare but is aptly amended for foreign palates by toning down the spiciness. Because there's no charge for the weekend dance performances, it makes for a fantastic cultural evening without breaking the bank. The Theater Cafe across the road is a relaxed open-air eatery for enjoying coffee, cakes, snacks, and cold drinks.

69/1 Soi Wat Rakhang, Arunamarin Rd., Siriraj, Thonburi. ✆ **02412-72878.** Main courses 240B. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sun 11am–midnight (performances start at 7:30pm). Tha Thien Pier and 5-min. shuttle-boat ride.

Inexpensive

Yok Yor Klongsan and Yok Yor Marina THAI These two riverside hangouts, which sit practically side by side, are both popular with Thais and Chinese tour groups, thanks to their seafood served outdoors or inside. Both restaurants offer no frills whatsoever, but the views, fresh air, and seafood make them good culinary escapes after sightseeing. In the evenings, expect painfully tuneless karaoke sessions to unfold on their stages. Lunch is a more tranquil bet. Evening diners can catch the free Yok Yor ferry from River City shopping mall.

Soi Somdej Chaowpraya, 17 (at the Yok Yor Marina, Somdej Chao Phraya Soi 17). ✆ **02863-0565.** www.yokyor.co.th. Main courses 70B–250B. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sun 11am–11pm. Saphan Taksin BTS and 5-min. shuttle-boat ride.

SILOM & SURAWONG ROADS

This is where you'll find the country's most expensive joints, nestled a few meters from busy street vendors and more familiar fare, ranging from McDonald's to pizzas. Head to the basements of any large shopping mall (for example, **Silom Complex**), great value Japanese sushi chains such as **Fuji,** or small cafes serving different noodles or Chinese hot pot to find excellent low-priced dinners. This area also has many independent restaurants; but beware, the majority serve up Thai food for tourists, so look out for places patronized by locals for more authentic eats.

Very Expensive

Breeze ★★★ PAN-ASIAN/SEAFOOD The Le Bua hotel has brought to Bangkok a unique Asian seafood experience that will amaze anyone who braves the giddy heights of this alfresco restaurant on the 51st and 52nd floors of State Tower. After crossing a long, illuminated "skybridge," descend into a cozy outdoor terrace overlooking the city. The fusion-inspired menu focuses on top-notch dim sum; fresh fish, such as steamed cod; and some contemporary pan-Asian seafood delicacies, including poached South Australian lobster and wasabi prawns and soft-shell crab (some of which can cause major collateral damage to the holiday budget). The menu also includes a wide selection of barbecued meats, imported lamb rack, or prime rib-eye steak, and some decent desserts, such as the Breeze On Ice (a selection of mousses with cantaloupe served on crushed ice). The experience is guaranteed to blow you—and, if you're not careful, your wallet—away.

State Tower (corner of Silom Rd. and Charoen Krung [New] Rd.), 1055 Silom Rd. ✆ **02624-9999.** www.breezebkk.com. Reservations required. Main courses from 1,500B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm. Saphan Taksin BTS.

The Dome at State Tower ★★★ INTERNATIONAL This award-winning dining complex is home to three of the city's most popular (and, at times, most expensive)

Tips on Dining: Bangkok Cheap Eats

As in most areas of the country, the city's many night bazaars and hawker stalls are where you'll find the best eats, but those who are nervous of tummy bugs or who are not inclined toward culinary adventures would do well to stick to the many food courts usually located inside shopping malls. Here, young Thais enjoy cheap eats in the luxury of air-conditioning; they can get packed with office workers noon to 1pm. In all food courts, you should buy coupons first, and cash in any you don't use afterward. In addition to the ones reviewed below, other notable food courts include All Seasons Place, Emporium, Siam Square, MBK, and the CentralWorld's Loft concept. All are usually located on the top floor or basement of stores and resemble simple self-service cafeterias.

The city's small, open-air joints and markets are also popular for snacks and quick lunches; they open Tuesday to Sunday from dawn until late. Food vendors are now banned on Mondays in Bangkok, in an effort to free up the already cluttered pavements. Eating right next to smoke-belching buses may not be your idea of gastronomic heaven, but being surrounded by the pungent aromas of garlic, chili, and barbecued meats, as well as the cacophony of the traffic or glaring lights, makes it a totally Thai experience. On the other hand, if you are missing hearty home fare or a sugar fix from Western desserts, fear not; even budget-strapped travelers can enjoy a range of clean and hearty dining spots all over town, at all hours.

Surawong and Silom Roads Every day except Mondays, the length of upper Surawong Road (the end closest to Rama IV Rd.) is a cluster of snack stalls and fruit vendors that spill into adjoining Thaniya Plaza. In places such as Soi

dining venues, and two of the top-rated rooftop bars—**Sky Bar** and **Distil** (see p. 144, "Bangkok After Dark"). **Sirocco** is a smart and stunningly positioned, supper-only outdoor terrace serving top-class Mediterranean-inspired cuisine, with live jazz most nights. On the 65th floor, **Mezzaluna** is a rare and refined, contemporary Italian eatery with an open kitchen, serving five-star Italian food together with panoramic views of the city. The third venue is **Breeze** (see above). The entire complex is geared for well-heeled, well-dressed professionals or high-spending holidaymakers who are looking for an awesome Bangkok experience; indeed, the views of Bangkok below are irresistible. A dress code applies to all fine-dining venues in State Tower.

State Tower (corner of Silom Rd. and Charoen Krung [New] Rd.), 1055 Silom Rd. ✆ **02624-9999.** www.lebua.com. Reservations recommended. A smart/casual dress code applies; i.e., no sleeveless shirts, shorts, or sandals. No children under 7. Main courses 500B–2,500B. AE, DC, MC, V. All outlets close at 1am (last orders 11:30pm). See website for all details and individual outlet opening times. Saphan Taksin BTS.

Expensive

Benjarong ★★ THAI Named for the exquisite five-color pottery once reserved exclusively for the royal family, Benjarong's fine Thai cuisine focuses on the five basic flavors of Thai cooking (salty, bitter, hot, sweet, and sour) in traditional "royal" dishes.

Convent off Silom Road (close to California Gym), you'll find stalls selling crab and shrimp, noodles, fried vegetarian patties, and delicious boiled chicken on rice.

Suan Lum Night Bazaar Just next to Lumphini Park, this sprawling shopping compound has been slated to be torn down for years, but things move slowly in Thailand, so it is still operating. The open-air food court is hardly Thai haute cuisine, but it's open from 6pm and costs little. Because it boasts a large central stage, you'll be serenaded by Thai rock bands who belt out deafening (and pretty tuneless) renditions of Western hits during your meal. Prepurchase food coupons (about 100B is enough) and choose from the many stalls.

Siam Paragon Food Court Right at Siam BTS, this glitzy megamall doesn't just cater to big-brand boutique shoppers; downstairs, it has a host of low-cost diners, pastry shops, and ice-cream parlors, as well as classy restaurants. The cheaper food stalls have just about every type of fare, including Thai, Indian, Japanese, and Vietnamese.

Khao San Road Area Starting from Phra Arthit Road, cutting through Soi Rambutri and heading toward Khao San Road, leads you past heaps of low-budget diners that serve Thai and Western food. Look out for great BBQ fish, served hot off the coals, or sizzling satays. These small-time diners extend to the busy Rambutri Road (parallel to Khao San Rd.), and many cater to late-night nibblers. Apart from Burger King and McDonald's, there are also plenty of stalls selling cheap pad Thai, Chinese congee *(johk),* or fried rice.

Note: For info on the safety of food stalls throughout Thailand, see p. 31.

While the a la carte menu is extensive, the most popular dishes are the sweet red curry crab claws and the exotic grilled fish with black beans in banana leaves. The illustrated menu will help you navigate your way through the choices. For after-dinner treats, the *khong-wan* is an ornate selection of typical Thai desserts—distinctive, light, and not too sweet.

The Dusit Thani, Rama IV Rd. (corner of Silom Rd. and Rama IV Rd.). ✆ **02200-9000,** ext. 2699. www.bangkok.com/dusitthani/dining. Reservations recommended. Main courses 280B–1,100B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6–10pm. Sala Daeng BTS.

The Blue Elephant ★★ ROYAL THAI Long-known and respected for its cooking school (see p. 133 in chapter 7), the Blue Elephant attracts diners looking for a taste of Royal Thai cuisine. Set in a gorgeously renovated colonial house, the restaurant boasts an ambience that's both elegant and unpretentious. Though the spiciness of some dishes has been tempered for foreign diners, the high standards and superb flavors of items, such as the classic betel leaf appetizer, sea bass, satay, and fish cakes, still make it extremely enjoyable. Dig into the signature dishes of salmon *larb;* foie gras accompanied by a tart, tamarind sauce; or the Thai green curry made with black-skinned chicken. There are also vegetarian dishes aplenty. The wine list contains Thai and international wines, some of which carry the restaurant's own label.

233 S. Sathorn Rd. ✆ **02673-9353.** www.blueelephant.com/bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses 700B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm. 5-min. walk from Surasak BTS.

Moderate

Eat Me ★ ASIAN FUSION Eat Me is all about exposed industrial beams, dark wood, and indirect lighting on walls of an ever-changing exhibition space. It tends to get billed as a supper-only art cafe (but thankfully the food is much better than the art, which is almost always purely commercial fare). The menu features a smattering of great fusion dishes (the tuna tartar and spicy lemongrass chicken are delicious) as well as fantastic desserts, such as sticky date pudding or lemongrass crème brûlée, brilliant culinary inspirations from the Aussie-Thai owners. The main air-conditioned room is a better bet than the mosquito-infested balcony overlooking a small courtyard. The young waiters' all-black uniforms and hands-free headsets would give them an ominous air if they weren't all so hysterically camp. There are some decent wines to boot.

1/6 Soi Pipat 2, off Soi Convent (connecting Sathorn and Silom rds.). ✆ **02238-0931.** Main courses from 350B. AE, MC, V. Daily 3pm–1am. Chong Nonsi BTS.

Le Bouchon ★★ FRENCH This hush-hush little French bistro is the kind of place that gets packed with French expats on lunch breaks and makes a great little candlelit venue in the evening. Because it's right in the thick of Patpong, you'll have to elbow your way past the hordes of sex show touts and cat-calling lady-boys to get there, but that is part of the fun. The food is delicious, though the rich sauces used can make the main courses rather heavy going—go for the goat-cheese salad or poached salmon for lighter options. There are also classic French desserts such as pears poached in wine. The chalkboard features daily specials, and the wine list is quite thorough. Lunches and dinner here can linger on—the food's so good, you may not want to leave. *Bon appétit.*

37/17 Patpong Soi 2 (btw. Surawong and Silom Rd.). ✆ **02234-9109.** Main courses from 300B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm and 7–11:15pm. Sala Daeng BTS.

Somboon Seafood ★ SEAFOOD This place is good for anyone willing to sacrifice atmosphere for excellent food. Though it's packed nightly, you'll still be able to find a table because the place is so huge. The staff is extremely friendly—between them and the picture menu, you'll have no problem picking out the best dishes. Peruse the large aquariums outside to see all the live seafood options such as prawn, fishes, lobsters, and crabs (guaranteed freshness). The house specialty, chili crab curry, is especially good, as is the *tom yum goong* soup (spiced to individual taste).

169/7–11 Surawong Rd. (just across from the Peugeot building). ✆ **02233-3104.** Main courses 150B–500B; seafood at market prices (about 800B for 2). No credit cards. Daily 4–11pm. Chong Nonsi BTS.

Inexpensive

The Barbican INTERNATIONAL This old favorite is still packing in expatriate punters with its casual British-pub style and a menu featuring plenty of international staples, such as pasta, goulash, or "Guinness pie," while on Sundays it presents an all-you-can-eat Mexican buffet. It's hardly chic, but at the heart of the somewhat-sleazy Thaniya Plaza, its casual atmosphere attracts foreign office workers and travelers hankering for some comfort food. It's most popular when the offices close and the happy hour starts, when it can be standing room only. Fight your way in—it's worth it.

9/4–5 Soi Thaniya, Silom Rd. (1 block east of Patpong, btw. Silom and Surawong rds.). ✆ **02234-3590.** Main courses from 180B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–1am. Sala Daeng BTS.

Taling Pling (Finds) THAI I've just one word for this friendly low-end Thai diner: Go! Because it's packed with office workers at lunchtime, it's better to try for a table after 1pm or in the evening. Rustic wooden decor and delightful old photographs adorn the walls. Menus come with photographs for foreigners, but the taste is thoroughly Thai and the low prices reflect this. Try the dry, fluffy catfish salad or the spicy green curry with beef. For those who really want to taste local dishes, the roast duck *panaeng* is recommended. Chicken in *pandanus* leaf and Thai fish cakes appease those whose palates prefer it less spicy. It's a fabulous place to feast, and there's now a new branch on the third floor of CentralWorld department store (✆ **02613-3160**).

60 Soi Pan (midway down the *soi,* connecting Silom and Sathorn rds.). ✆ **02236-4830.** Main courses 150B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–10:30pm. Surasak BTS.

RATCHADAMRI, SATHORN & SUKHUMVIT AREA

Very Expensive

Bed Supper Club ★★ ASIAN FUSION Billed as one of the coolest places in Bangkok since it opened in 2002, this place consists of an all-white, two-story eatery-cum-nightclub located in what can only be described as an industrially styled, white illuminated tube. The surreal atmosphere is only accentuated by the trance music that's regularly spun by DJs. Instead of sitting at tables, diners take off their shoes and lounge on long white ottomans while the music pumps. (Great if you can eat lying down, not so fun if you can't.) A fixed, set menu is served nightly (with allowances for vegetarians), with three courses Sunday to Thursday and four courses on Friday and Saturday. Culinary combinations of dishes such as Australian beef tenderloin, truffle oil hollandaise, crispy potato fondant, and white asparagus, or Thai mushroom ragout, roasted shallots, oregano gremolata, and pappardelle pasta set the tone. If you like this style of contemporary Asian-meets-Mediterranean food and don't mind eating in bed, you'll think this supper club is fantastic.

26 Soi 11 (by Sukhumvit Rd.). ✆ **02651-3537.** www.bedsupperclub.com. Reservations required. No shorts for men. Set menu 1,450B–1,850B. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7:30pm–midnight and until 1am on weekends. 8-min. walk from Nana BTS.

New York Steakhouse ★★★ STEAK One of the best steakhouses in the region, the JW Marriott's steakhouse offers plenty of dark wood and high, leather wing chairs, and is the best place for a juicy imported Angus steak served with a host of hearty sides (mushrooms, broccoli with cheese, mashed potatoes, and veggies). If money is no object, splash out on roast prime rib or grilled lamb chops. Seafood choices cover the whole gamut from oysters, to Alaskan crab, to tiger prawns, to Phuket lobster. The long wine list is, not surprisingly, dominated by red wines. Dress code is casual (but no shorts or sandals). Expect professional service and a businesslike atmosphere.

JW Marriott (2nd floor), 4 Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 2. ✆ **02656-9798** (direct) or the hotel at 02656-7700. www.marriott.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 1,750B–6,500B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm. Nana BTS.

Pier 59 ★★★ SEAFOOD This fashionable seafood restaurant on the 59th floor of the Banyan Tree Hotel caters to the new generation of Bangkok diners who don't mind paying handsomely for cool and contemporary decor, superb Asian-infused cuisine, and impeccable service. Guests wade into a dark, cavernous room, divided by luminous aquariums that glow a deep, dazzling indigo. There they'll be given a menu that features such treats as oysters and caviar, and plenty of fish dishes (choose from barramundi, wild salmon, and sea bass) that are all cooked with a contemporary twist. While seafood is the

focus, the menu also includes meat as well as vegetarian dishes. The chocolate brandy ice cream is a great finale, or go for the miniature selection of bite-size desserts. The venue's beautiful views and the standards of culinary excellence are helping raise the benchmark for contemporary culinary elegance in this otherwise heavily tourist-populated part of town.

The Banyan Tree, 21/100 S. Sathorn Rd. (halfway down Sathorn Rd.). ✆ **02679-1200.** www.banyantree.com/bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses from 1,000B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6pm–1am. A short taxi ride from Chong Nonsi BTS or Lumphini MRT.

Expensive

Le Banyan ★★ FRENCH A spreading banyan tree on the edge of the gardenlike grounds inspires this restaurant's name. An upscale venue that serves suppers only, Le Banyan, for years, has been the domain of Michel Binaux and Bruno Bischoff. The decor is warm in tone, furnished with sisal matting and white clapboard walls adorned with Thai carvings, old photos, and prints of early Bangkok. The house special is a dish for two, a Rouennaise pressed duck with goose liver; other high-end choices include lobster bisque, chateaubriand with Armagnac, or Provençal-style rack of lamb. There are daily specials and a list of fine wines. If you come on foot, you'll run the gauntlet of all the girly bars at the entrance of the *soi,* but ignore those until you arrive at this little upscale gem, and you'll enjoy an evening of fine dining and effusive service.

59 Sukhumvit Soi 8. ✆ **02253-5556.** www.le-banyan.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 900B. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6:30–9:30pm. 10-min. walk from Nana BTS.

Shin Daikoku ★ JAPANESE This is the most central outpost of a popular Japanese eatery (there's another branch in Sukhumvit Soi 19). It's a home away from home for many Japanese expatriates in Bangkok, and the food is deliciously authentic. Noodle dishes come in the form of soba and udon, and there's plenty of sushi, sashimi, and tepanyaki steaks. Female staff wear cotton robes known as *yukata* and pad around politely, hovering over every detail of the meal. Desserts include the perennially popular green-tea ice-cream crepe with brandy. The roaring laughter and shouts of "Kampai!" tell you that they're doing it right here. A la carte dishes are small and rather expensive, but they're worth it. And they have good sushi and sashimi sets. Order some sake, take your shoes off, and enjoy.

InterContinental Hotel, 973 Ploenchit Rd. ✆ **02656-0096.** Reservations recommended. Main courses from 950B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 5–10:30pm. Phloen Chit and Siam BTS.

Moderate

Baan Khanitha ★★ (Value) THAI With one location on busy Sathorn Road and another (the original) on Sukhumvit Soi 23, Baan Khanitha offers authentic Thai in a comfortable, classy atmosphere. For starters, choose the *yam som o,* a tangy salad with pomelo, shrimps, and chicken. Then you can graduate to a curry, from spicy red to mellow yellow and green; light salads; and good seafood, prepared as you like it. Follow up with good Thai desserts. Thais actually come here, a rarity for upscale Thai eateries, and both places are always packed: a couple of good signs. Be sure to call ahead.

69 S. Sathorn Rd. ✆ **02675-4200** and 36/1 Sukhumvit Soi 23 (✆ **02258-4128**). www.baan-khanitha.com. Reservations highly recommended. Main courses 240B–580B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm. 5-min. walk from Phloen Chit BTS station.

Biscotti ★★ ITALIAN This must be Bangkok's most stylish and consistently praised Italian restaurant. Its open kitchen and slick, minimalist decor give it a modern

sophistication that few Italian restaurants in Bangkok can match. The long tables and polished wood floors give it a welcome, homey air. Equally unmatched are its cuisine and top-class service, which don't come with too big a price tag, like so many others. Choose from the plate of miniature Italian appetizers (this can consist of anything from scallops, tuna, or beef); there's a great choice of fresh fish, a range of wood-fired pizzas, and an unending list of antipasti, not to mention homemade pastas and risottos. Save space for one of the irresistible desserts, or finish off with one of the excellent wines. It's smart, it's elegant, and it's utterly timeless.

The Four Seasons, 155 Ratchadamri Rd. ✆ **02126-8866.** www.fourseasons.com/bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses 270B–550B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2:30pm and 6–10:30pm. Ratchadamri BTS.

Crystal Jade ★ CHINESE Located in the heart of the shopping area, in the Siam Paragon Mall, this popular two-story Chinese restaurant has many branches across Asia. At Siam Paragon, the decor is elegant and enclosed—it's a nice escape from the seething food court. The Chinese fare is fast and fresh, with northern-style dumplings, noodles, and wonton soup. You'll also find Cantonese favorites such as suckling pig, deep-fried prawns, and barbeque pork, plus extravagant dishes such as abalone. There's also a branch at Erawan mall, where the decor is more like a fast-food joint, and the food is cheaper and more casual.

Ground Floor, Siam Paragon Mall. 991 Rama I Rd. ✆ **02129-4343.** Main courses from 380B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 5:30–10pm. Siam BTS.

Kuppa ★★ INTERNATIONAL Located off the Asok BTS in a former warehouse (reputedly a CIA hangout), this laid-back Western cafe–restaurant boasts a chic, minimalist interior with plenty of polished concrete and artworks. The food has a neo-Australian flair, and the pan-Asian and Pacific Rim dishes blend together the best of Thai and Western cuisine. The soft-shell crab, Parma ham, and salami platter; grilled dory; and duck liver parfait are all superb. Grilled items are sometimes served with mashed potatoes; stacks of salads and seafood round out the menu. Desserts are classic Australian stuff: puddings, cakes, and hearty dollops of cream. Kuppa has good couches for kicking back and a section for smokers. If you haven't got time to grab a lunch, come for the great coffee, and don't miss the hulking roaster machine, a centerpiece of the dining area, where Kuppa's own blend is roasted weekly. Brunch on weekends is a fun social event.

39 Sukhumvit Soi 16. ✆ **02663-0495.** Main courses 250B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 10:30am–10:30pm. Short taxi ride from Asok BTS.

Lemongrass ★★ THAI Nouvelle Thai cuisine tailored to Western tastes is the specialty of this pleasant restaurant. Just a short walk from the Skytrain (near Phrom Pong) and right across from the hulking Emporium shopping center. Lemongrass is set in a small Thai mansion handsomely converted and furnished with antiques. A visit here makes it easy to forget busy Bangkok outside. Try house favorites such as pomelo salad or chicken satay. Also excellent are the *tom yang kung* (a spicy-and-sour prawn soup with galangal) and the tender, juicy lemongrass chicken.

5/1 Sukhumvit Soi 24 (south of Sukhumvit Rd., on Soi 24). ✆ **02258-8637.** Reservations highly recommended. Main courses 200B–480B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 6–11pm. Phrom Phong BTS station.

Mrs. Balbir's ★ INDIAN There's a cheerful atmosphere at this restaurant, thanks to the affable and effervescent owner, Mrs. (Vinder) Balbir, whose jolly banter accompanies any lunch or supper. The menu covers all sorts of Punjabi goodies such as biryani, dahl,

chicken tikka masala, and deliciously smooth cheese and spinach dishes. All of Mrs. Balbir's food comes with homemade pickled onions and chutneys. She now also offers several Indo-Chinese dishes. As famous for being a TV chef as much as a restaurateur, Mrs. Balbir runs highly enjoyable cooking classes from her home; see p. 133 in chapter 7 for information.

155/1–2 Sukhumvit Soi 11/1. ✆ **02651-0498.** www.mrsbalbir.com. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses around 300B. MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm. 5-min. walk from Nana BTS.

Seafood Market ★ SEAFOOD This place is fun but very touristy. Their motto is "If it swims, we have it," so if you're a seafood fan, you'll love it, though you may not have had a dining experience like this before. You'll enter the giant hangar of a fish market, and, before you sit down, you can wander around the seafood counters and choose your supper, either live or on ice, all priced by the kilo. Pay for it all at the cashier, and then cart it back to the table. At this point, choose how you'd like it cooked and what sauces you prefer. Waiters can help with suggestions for your catch, but what comes out of the kitchen is always good. Cooking charges and corkage are paid separately at the end of the meal. The seafood is market price, and the fish, incredibly fresh.

89 Sukhumvit Soi 24 (Soi Kasami). ✆ **02261-2071.** www.seafood.co.th. Reservations recommended for weekend dinner. Market prices. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–midnight. Phrom Phong BTS.

Shintaro ★★ JAPANESE A Japanese restaurant with a difference. Gone are the clichés of kimono-clad, bowing waitresses tottering along on getas yelling "Konban-wa!" This small but snazzy diner is decked out in contemporary decor and offers not just classic Japanese but some cutting-edge culinary offerings too. Packed as it is with young, well-heeled locals and businessmen, this must be the city's most fashionable Japanese restaurant. (Check out what look like noodle-clad walls, by designer Tony Chi.) Whether dining along a long bench, facing the busy chefs, or at the side tables, expect the unexpected; the finest quality slabs of sashimi, artfully hand-rolled sushi, succulent foie gras rolls, or tasty soba noodles. Hot dishes include grilled salmon, done to perfection. Don't pass up the desserts, such as sago with fresh melon; they're the perfect ending to a superb lunch or supper.

The Four Seasons, 155 Rachadamri Rd. ✆ **02126-8866.** www.fourseasons.com/bangkok. Reservations recommended. Main courses 320B–550B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5–10:30pm. Ratchadamri BTS.

Inexpensive

Cabbages & Condoms ★ Value THAI Here's a restaurant with a purpose. Opened by local senator Mechai Viravaidya, founder of the Population & Community Development

Cricket, Anyone?

Look for the snack stands along Sukhumvit Road (also Khao San Rd.) that sell all sorts of fried insects. Grasshoppers, beetles that look like cockroaches, scorpions, ants, and grubs are all favorite snacks for folks from Isan, in the northeast, where bugs, in fact, are cultivated for the dining table and are an important source of protein in the region. How does it taste? Crickets are a bit like popcorn, and the beetles are something like a crispy chicken. Even if you don't indulge, it's a great photo op.

Association, this restaurant helps fund population control, AIDS awareness, and a host of rural development programs. Set in a large compound, the two-story restaurant has air-conditioned indoor dining, but if you sit on the garden terrace, you're in a fairyland of twinkling lights that's quite romantic. Share a whole fish or try the *kai hor bai toey* (fried boneless chicken wrapped in pandanus leaves with a dark, sweet soy sauce for dipping). There's also a large selection of vegetable and bean curd entrees. Before you leave, be sure to check out the gift shop's whimsical condom-related merchandise.

10 Sukhumvit Soi 12. ✆ **02229-4610.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 100B–450B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm. 15-min. walk from Asok BTS.

Crepes & Co. ★★ (Kids) MEDITERRANEAN/CAFE Popular among Bangkok foreign residents (and their kids), this is a great place to satisfy your sweet tooth. Crepes here are light, fluffy, and filled with dozens of combinations, both savory and sweet—all of them delicious. They also serve good Mediterranean main courses such as mezze or couscous. Everyone is friendly—even the cat, who sometimes likes to curl up and sleep next to diners. They have great coffee and a good selection of tea.

18/1 Sukhumvit Soi 12. ✆ **02653-3990.** www.crepes.co.th. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150B–560B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 9am–midnight. 15-min. walk from Asok BTS.

Dosa King ★ INDIAN/VEGETARIAN Recently relocated to Sukhumvit Soi 11/1, this restaurant serves the popular Punjabi dish that is a large rice and lentil flour pancake, filled with savory goodies such as curry. It's folded and served with delicious sauces, and is 100% vegetarian. Dosa King does have other traditional Indian dishes, but stick with the house special and you'll enjoy a quick, healthy meal while escaping the masses along Sukhumvit.

153/7 Sukhumvit Soi 11/1. ✆ **02651-1700.** www.dosaking.net. Main courses 150B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm. Nana BTS.

Govinda ★ ITALIAN/VEGETARIAN No one can resist this home-style eatery that makes some of the best Italian food in the city and yet charges very reasonable prices. Plus, it's a wholly vegetarian menu, featuring fabulous pastas, dozens of soya-meat dishes, and even vegetarian salamis and sausages. The Italian couple who runs this low-key, two-story diner is extremely welcoming and works hard to keep the food absolutely authentic. Dive into handmade gnocchi (made with pumpkin), excellent vegetarian lasagna, or egg-based pasta. Though the desserts are not as impressive, the ice cream is a great end to one of the best value meals you can find in Bangkok.

6/5–6/6 Sukhumvit Soi 22. ✆ **02263-4970.** Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses from 170B. AE, MC, V. Wed–Mon 11:30am–3pm and 6–11pm. 15-min. walk from Phrom Phong BTS.

Vientiane Kitchen ★ LAOTIAN The cuisine of Laos is the same as that of Isan, or Northeastern Thailand, with sticky rice, grilled chicken, *som tam* (spicy green papaya salad), and *larb* (spicy ground pork salad) being a few of the most popular dishes. Isan food is generally very spicy, and adventurous eaters have ample opportunities to sample something out of the ordinary here, such as snails or red ants' eggs in a spicy salad. The place is large and barnlike, the decor is very simple—thatched roofs and bamboo chairs—and the clientele is an eclectic mix of Thais and foreigners. Most evenings, there is entertainment in the form of *mor lam* music (a very rhythmic style from Isan and Laos), with accompanying dancers, and they will arrange a special blessing ceremony for anyone celebrating their birthday.

8 Sukhumvit Soi 36. ✆ **02258-6171.** www.vientiane-kitchen.com. Main courses 150B–220B. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight. Thong Lo Skytrain.

BANGLAMPOO & KHAO SAN ROAD

Khao San Road used to be Bangkok's busy backpacker quarter, but it's moved rapidly upmarket in recent years. It's still where you'll find every manner of food, from kosher and halal cuisine, to Italian, as well as tasty Thai food served streetside. Avoid the blander versions of Western food served at budget guesthouses, but do have a seat somewhere along the busy road, order up a fruit shake, and watch the nightly parade of young travelers. Below are a few well-known choices near Khao San.

Moderate

Hemlock (Value) THAI The extensive and wide-ranging menu, which includes several vegetarian options, combined with a relaxing atmosphere and very reasonable prices, makes this a hot favorite for young Thais. It's also a good place to escape the hustle and bustle of nearby Khao San Road, though it's best to book a table on weekends. If you're feeling adventurous, try the *yam hua plii* (banana flower salad)—a marvelous blend of tastes and texture.

56 Phra Arthit Rd., Banglampoo. ✆ **02282-7507.** Reservations recommended. Main courses from 80B. MC, V. Mon–Sat 5pm–midnight. Ferry to Banglampoo Pier.

Ton Pho ★ THAI This almost-20-year-old restaurant is popular with locals, and a good place to try real Thai food (at real Thai prices). The restaurant is riverside but overlooks the busy public boat pier that accesses Banglampoo and the popular Khao San Road area—which means that the view is of groups gathering and departing on smoke-belching river buses rather than a wide riverside landscape. Great stir-fries and classic Thai dishes, such as *tom yum goong* and coconut milk–infused soups and curries, make up for the poor view.

43 Phra Arthit Rd., Banglampoo. ✆ **02280-0452.** Main courses 90B–250B. No credit cards. Daily 11am–10pm. Ferry to Banglampoo Pier.

Inexpensive

May Kaidee's (Finds) VEGETARIAN/THAI Over the years, May Kaidee's has become a bit of a pilgrimage spot for visiting foodies. This place has little more than some modest tables tucked into a little alleyway, but nevertheless it's the home of some healthy and delicious Thai vegetarian dishes. Mrs. May (pronounced *My*) has developed a real following by cooking up dishes such as spicy massaman or Thai green curry, as well as soups and stir-fries. All dishes come with a choice of white or brown rice. For dessert, don't pass up the black sticky rice with mango. Her cookbook is for sale and she even offers cooking classes.

At the end of Khao San Rd., in a sub-*soi* off Soi Damnoen Klang. ✆ **08913-73173.** Main courses from 60B. No credit cards. Daily 8am–10pm. 10-min. walk from Banglampoo Pier.

DINNER WITH THAI DANCE

Patravadi Theatre ★ THAI This cozy little theater on the Thonburi side of the river is a great spot to catch a performance of traditional Thai dance, or even a modern dance troupe, while enjoying some delicious Thai dishes, though it's limited to weekends only. Call or check their website for information about upcoming events. The theater restaurant is set in an attractive garden and serves Thai food, with some vegetarian and

some pasta dishes, while the riverside Studio 9 specializes in Thai fusion dishes. The backdrop is particularly impressive at night, when the illuminated spires of the Grand Palace are visible across the river.

69/1 Soi Wat Rakhang, Arunamarin Rd., Siriraj, Thonburi. ✆ **02412-72878.** www.patravaditheatre.com. Main courses from 240B. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sun 11am–midnight. Tha Thien Pier and 5-min. shuttle-boat ride.

Sala Rim Nam ★★ THAI The Oriental Hotel reopened this beautiful riverside Thai restaurant in late 2007 with a glittering new interior but the same impeccable standards of cuisine and commendable entertainment. The location is across the river from the main hotel, and the ferryboat ride across is quite lovely. The set menu is more like an extensive degustation menu of Thai favorites. Nothing is too heavy, but do mention to the waiter before you dine, if you can't take spicy food. Guests can choose between sitting Thai-style on floor pillows or using the plush Western-style seating, from where they watch classical Thai dancers, in full glittering regalia, perform ancient Thai legends and rousing drum-frenzied folk dances. A free shuttle boat leaves the hotel's pier regularly, or take the BTS to Saphan Taksin and follow the signs to the Hotel Shuttle Boat Pier, just next to Central Pier. Guests now have the option of a buffet lunch as well as the set dinner, though there is no performance at that time.

The Oriental, Bangkok (on Charoen Nakhorn Rd., on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River). ✆ **02437-3080.** www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok. Lunch 900B, dinner 2,650B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–2pm and 7–10pm, performance at 8:30pm. Saphan Taksin BTS.

DINNER CRUISES ON THE CHAO PHRAYA RIVER

There are a number of tour operators who offer dinner cruises along the Chao Phraya River. These vary from massive, floating discotheques with all-you-can-eat buffets to plush rice barges with delightful old-world decor and more intimate surrounds. Most offer special rates for children. All serve Thai set dinners or buffets; less pricey cruises may just offer cocktails at sunset. Some may come with traditional music, live rock bands, or Thai dance shows, depending on the operator; see individual websites for details. Based out of the **Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa,** the *Manohra, Manohra Moon,* and *Manohra Star* (✆ **02477-0770;** www.manohracruises.com) are elegantly restored rice barges that offer dinner and cocktail cruises on the Chao Phraya River, from 2,500B. Numbers are limited and boats can be chartered for private functions. The **Shangri-La Hotel** (✆ **02236-7777**) offers a totally different experience on the gargantuan *Horizon II;* this neon-drenched vessel heads upstream with Thai and Western pop music blasting out from 8 to 10pm and offers fun-packed nights of feasting and dancing. Cruises start at 2,200B. Similar in style to the *Horizon II* is the *Grand Pearl* cruise (✆ **02861-0255,** ext. 201; www.grandpearlcruise.com), with rates from 1,500B, while another rice barge option (though carrying more passengers than the *Manohra*) is offered by *Loy Nava* (✆ **02437-7329;** www.loynava.com), with two sailings daily at 6 to 8pm and 8 to 10pm; prices start from 1,500B.

Most cruises start from their respective hotels, or in the case of the two latter cruises, leave from River City Shopping Mall pier, next to the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel.

7

What to See & Do in Bangkok

A stroll down any of Bangkok's thousands of sprawling and labyrinthine alleyways can bring untold adventures for visitors who are keen to unearth the *real* Thailand. First-time visitors are often amazed by central Bangkok's glittering modernity, and at the same time, delighted by the treasures found amid the grunginess of ramshackle back streets; it's very easy to stumble across hidden markets, museums, or spectacular temples. This chapter presents the main highlights of the city's sights plus a final section detailing a few worthy side trips from Bangkok. Each section will give you an idea of the scope of things to do. "Bangkok's Waterways" gives you the ins and outs of the city's canals; "Bangkok's Top Historical Treasures & Wats" covers the city's magnificent palaces, charming traditional residences, and fascinating museums. "Cultural & Wellness Pursuits" lets you in on unique local experiences, and "Staying Active" is for sports people—both participants and observers.

The "Shopping" section gives you the lowdown on what to buy and where, and "Bangkok After Dark" details the city's unending entertainments, such as dance, theater, and nightclubs. Bangkok is famous for being just as vibrant after dark as in the day. Many of its largest boulevards are swathed in fairy lights, and a bevy of swish rooftop bars all offer fantastic night views. Admittedly, things aren't as crazy as roughly a decade ago, when the party scene ran nonstop until dawn, and alcohol flowed day or night. Under laws imposed under ex–Prime Minister Thaksin, all bars and clubs must now close at 1am (though don't be surprised if you find the odd exception). That said, Bangkok has many markets, bars, and clubs open until at least midnight, plus the big department stores and malls don't close until around 9pm—which should sate even the hardiest shopaholic.

1 BANGKOK'S WATERWAYS

The key to Bangkok's rise lies in the Chao Phraya River, which courses stealthily through its center, feeding a complex network of canals and locks that, until relatively recently, were the focus of city life. Lying just a few miles from the Gulf of Thailand, the river was a major conduit for trade, and the main reason behind its rapid growth. Today, nothing much has changed: Great black barges filled with rice, coal, or sand are towed up and down the river by small yellow tugs; at any time of the day you might spot grey Royal Naval vessels, police on Port Authority jet skis, stout wooden sampans, and even blue barges stacked with Pepsi-Cola bottles, all plying these waters.

In the late 18th century, Thailand's first monarch of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I, moved the capital eastward from Thonburi (a suburb of today's Bangkok) across the river to the district that became known as Rattanakosin Island, so-called due to the man-made canals that surrounded this entire area. Like medieval moats, these canals *(klongs)* acted as a defensive barrier. Other canals were soon added, channeling the waters of the Chao

Phraya into peripheral communities, feeding fish ponds or rice paddies, and nurturing the city's many tropical fruit orchards. These waterways fast became the aquatic boulevards and avenues of this low-lying, swampy city. Apart from structures built for royalty, ordinary Bangkok residents lived on water, in bamboo raft homes, or on boats. As foreign diplomats, missionaries, and writers traveled to Bangkok, they drew parallels with the Italian city of Venice and renamed it the "Venice of the East." Not until the early 1800s were nonroyal houses built on dry land.

Due to the health hazards posed by these open *klongs,* and the gradual need for more stable land with the advent of vehicular transport, many of the canals were paved over in the last century. By the late 1970s, most of the city's paddy fields had disappeared. In fact, much of today's Bangkok has been reclaimed from former marshland. Fears are growing as global warming raises sea levels and the effects of seasonal flooding on the city are becoming more drastic.

For a glimpse of traditional Thai life, schedule a few hours to explore the waterways. You'll see people using the river to bathe, wash their clothes, and even brush their teeth at water's edge (not recommended). Floating kitchens occupy small motorized canoes from which the pilot-cum-chef serves rice and noodles to the occupants on other boats. Men, wrapped in nothing more than a loincloth, tiptoe across floating carpets of logs en route to the lumber mills; ramshackle huts on stilts adorned with 100-year-old fretwork tumble down into *klongs;* while at low tide, the rib cages of sunken boats appear out of the oozing mud.

Opportunities abound for exploring Bangkok's small *klong* networks and river arteries. The most frequently seen boat on the river is the **longtail,** a needle-shaped craft driven by a raucous outboard engine and covered in a striped awning. These act as river taxis for tourists and locals alike. Private longtails congregate at **Maharaj, Chang,** and **Si Phya** public piers and at **River City** (✆ **02235-3108**). If you are confident of your haggling skills, you can try to charter a longtail yourself for about 1,000B an hour—be sure to agree on the charge before you get in the boat. ***Note:*** Beware of independent boat operators who offer to take you to souvenir or gem shops.

Otherwise, if you head to the riverside exit of Saphan Taksin BTS, there's also an official kiosk down on the riverfront, with tour information, including tickets for the hop-on, hop-off **Chao Phraya Express** (✆ **02623-6001**). This runs every half-hour, daily from 9:30am to 4pm, and is a more comfortable option than the (more cramped) longtails or tatty wooden express boats that act as the city's river taxis.

You can also go on a formal tour of the *klongs.* The following operators can arrange itineraries, with 2-hour tours costing about 1,300B per person, including an English-speaking guide: **World Travel** (✆ **02233-5900**), **Sea Tours** (✆ **02216-5783**), and **Diethelm Travel** (✆ **02660-7000;** www.diethelmtravel.com). Any hotel concierge can also make arrangements.

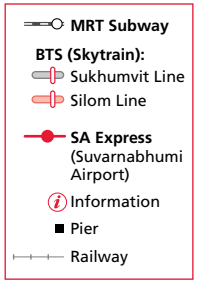
However you tour the *klongs,* take the time to explore **Klong Bangkok Noi** and **Klong Bangkok Yai.** Also stop at the **Royal Barge Museum** (see "Bangkok's Top Historical Treasures & Wats," below), a wonderful riverside hangar crammed with long, narrow vessels covered in gilt carvings, brought out only to commemorate rare events such as a milestone in the monarch's reign or the visit of a dignitary.

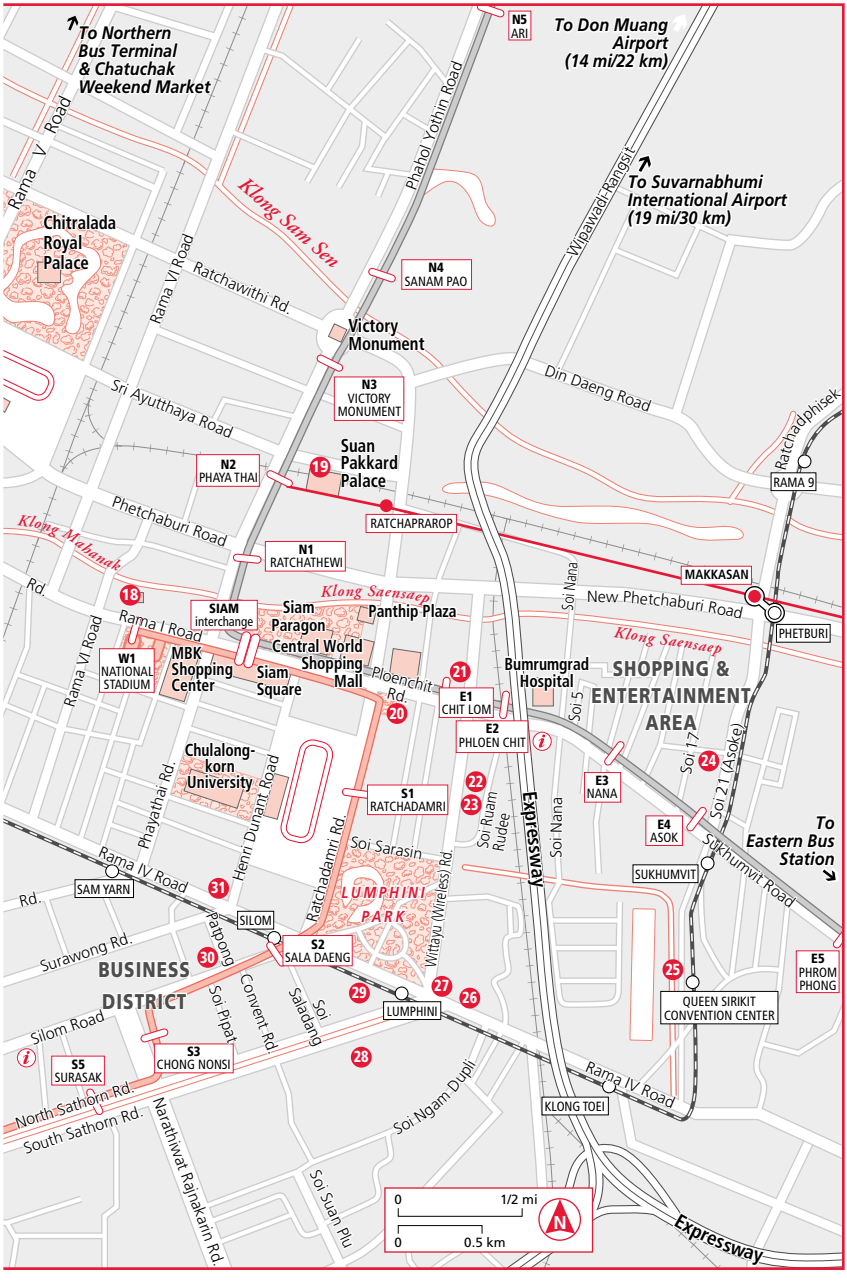
Many visitors are disappointed by the hugely commercial (some may say overrated) **floating market** at Damnoen Saduak, about 80km (50 miles) southwest of Bangkok, in Ratchaburi Province. A better and more authentic experience is to head upstream to picturesque **Ko Kret;** see "Side Trips from Bangkok," later in this chapter.

Erawan Shrine **20**
The Grand Palace **12**
Jim Thompson's House **18**
Lumphini Boxing Stadium **26**
Museum of Siam **14**
The National Museum **6**
Patravadi Theater **11**
Queen Sirikit Convention Center **25**
Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium **3**
Red Cross Snake Farm **31**
Royal Barge Museum **4**
Siam Society **24**
Vimanmek Teak Mansion **1**
Wang Suan Pakkard **19**
Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) **15**
Wat Benchamabophit Marble Temple) **2**
Wat Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic) **7**
Wat Phra Kaew (Emerald Buddha Temple) **10**
Wat Po **13**
Wat Saket (The Golden Mount) **8**
Wat Suthat and the Giant Swing **9**
Wat Traimit (The Golden Buddha) **17**

MARKETS
Khao San Road **5**
Pak Klong Flower Market **16**
Patpong Night Market **30**
Suan Lum Night Market **27**

EMBASSIES
American Embassy **23**
Australian Embassy **28**
British Embassy **21**
Canadian Embassy **29**
New Zealand Embassy **22**




To Northern Bus Terminal & Chatuchak Weekend Market
To Don Muang Airport (14 mi/22 km)
To Suvarnabhumi International Airport (19 mi/30 km)
Chitralada Royal Palace
Rama V Road
Rama VI Road
Ratchawithi Rd.
Klong Sam Sen
Phaholyothin Road
Wipawadi Rangsit
N5 ARI
N4 SANAM PAO
Victory Monument
N3 VICTORY MONUMENT
Din Daeng Road
Sri Ayutthaya Road
Suan Pakkard Palace
N2 PHAYA THAI
Ratchadphisek
RAMA 9
Phetchaburi Road
Klong Makkasan
RATCHAPRAROP
N1 RATCHATHEWI
MAKKASAN
Klong Saensaep
New Phetchaburi Road
PHETBURI
Soi Nana
SIAM interchange
Siam Paragon
Panthip Plaza
Central World
Rama I Road
W1 NATIONAL STADIUM
MBK Shopping Center
Siam Square
Shopping Mall
Ploenchit Rd.
Bumrungrad Hospital
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT AREA
E1 CHIT LOM
E2 PHLOEN CHIT
Soi 5
Soi 17
Soi 21 (Asoke)
E3 NANA
E4 ASOK
Sukhumvit Road
To Eastern Bus Station
SUKHUMVIT
Chulalongkorn University
Phayathai Rd.
Henri Dunant Road
S1 RATCHADAMRI
Soi Ruam Rudee
Soi Sarasin
Ratchadamri Rd.
LUMPHINI PARK
Wittayu (Wireless) Rd.
Expressway
Rama IV Road
SAM YAN
SILOM
S2 SALA DAENG
Patpong
Surawong Rd.
BUSINESS DISTRICT
Soi Pipat
Convent Rd.
Soi Saladang
LUMPHINI
QUEEN SIRIKIT CONVENTION CENTER
E5 PHROM PHONG
Silom Road
S5 SURASAK
S3 CHONG NONSI
North Sathorn Rd.
South Sathorn Rd.
Narathiwat Rajnakarin Rd.
Soi Ngam Duplu
KLONG TOEI
Soi Suan Plu
0 1/2 mi
0 0.5 km
N

2 BANGKOK'S TOP HISTORICAL TREASURES & WATS

Thailand is a veritable mishmash of cultures, a crossroads where Indian, Khmer, Chinese, European, and Thai histories collide. This becomes most apparent in the architectural whimsy seen in its grandest structures. No trip to Thailand is complete without a visit to the Grand Palace, Wat Phra Kaew, and Wat Po.

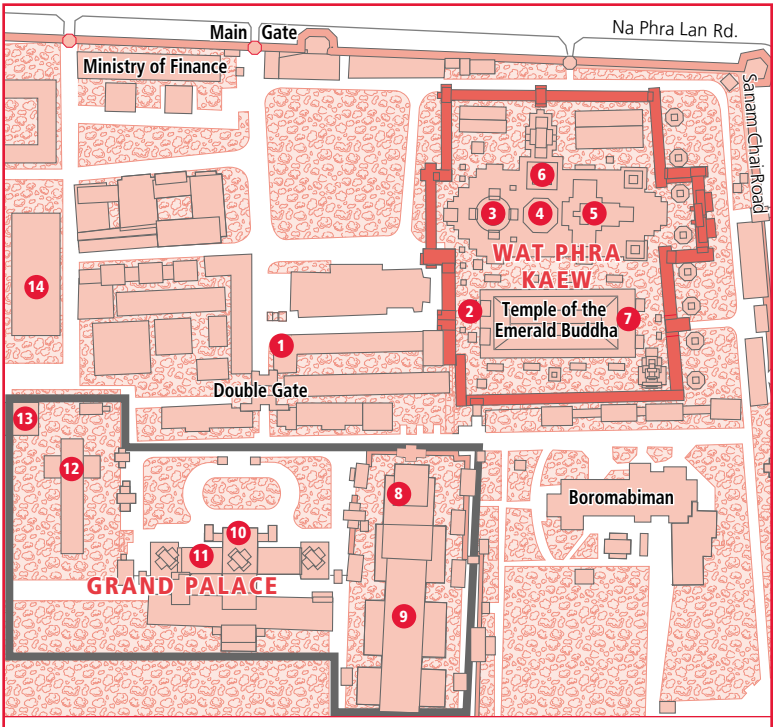
Note that strict dress codes apply to visiting these sites, so be sure to wear appropriate attire; remember, shoes must be removed in places of worship, and you won't be allowed into any royal or religious site if you're exposing your shoulders or dressed in skirts/shorts above the knee.

Wat Phra Kaew & the Grand Palace ★★★ The number one destination in Bangkok is also one of the most imposing and visually fascinating. If you arrive at 8:30am, when the gates first open, you may have the place virtually to yourself; also remember that it closes at 3:30pm, so don't show up any later than 2pm. Though it's seen by thousands of tourists, who arrive at the gates in bus loads, its immensity still dwarfs the throngs. After passing muster with the fashion police at the main gate (rules are inconsistently enforced, but many have been turned away for inappropriate dress) and queuing for your ticket (keep it safe for admission to other sites), you'll be directed to the entrance to **Wat Phra Kaew** (the Emerald Buddha temple).

This is the most revered temple in the kingdom by Thai people, and its name refers to the petite jadeite (not emerald) statue that sits atop a huge gold altar in the temple's main hall, or *bot.* The Buddha image is clothed in seasonal robes, changed three times a year to correspond to the summer, winter, and rainy months. The changing of the robes is an important ritual, performed by the king, who also sprinkles water over the monks and well-wishers to bring good fortune during the upcoming season. The statue is the subject of much devotion among Thais; bizarrely, it is also the religious icon to which politicians (accused of corruption) swear innocence. The magically empowered statue was rumored to have been made in North Thailand in the 15th century, before being installed at a temple in Laos, only to be taken back by the Thais and brought to the capital around 1780—a sore subject between the nations.

As you enter the site, one of the first things you see is a stone statue of a hermit, considered a patron of medicine, before which relatives of the infirm pay homage and make offerings. The inside walls of the compound are decorated with murals depicting the entire *Ramakien,* a Thai epic, painted during the reign of Rama I and regularly restored. Its 178 scenes begin at the north gate and continue clockwise.

Following around to the left, visitors are then faced with three striking monuments: The first, to the west, is **Phra Si Rattana Chedi,** a 19th-century Sri Lankan–style stupa housing ashes of the Buddha; second, in the middle, is the library, or **Phra Mondop,** built in Thai style by Rama I, known for its excellently crafted Ayutthaya-style mother-of-pearl doors, bookcases containing the *Tripitaka* (sacred Buddhist manuscripts), human- and dragon-headed *nagas* (snakes), and statues of Chakri kings; and third, to the east, is the **Royal Pantheon,** built in Khmer style during the 19th century—it's open to the public in October for 1 day to commemorate the founding of the Chakri dynasty. To the immediate north of the library is a model of Angkor Wat, the most sacred of all Cambodian shrines. The model was constructed by King Mongkut as a reminder that the neighboring state was once under the dominion of Thailand.



From here you can enter the central shrine, or *bot,* where the tiny Emerald Buddha is housed on a tall pedestal; note the exquisite inlaid mother-of-pearl work on the door panels. The interior walls are decorated with late-Ayutthaya-style murals depicting the life of the Buddha; the images flow counterclockwise and end with the most important stage: enlightenment. The surrounding portico of the *bot* is an example of masterful Thai craftsmanship. On the perimeter are 12 open pavilions, built during the reign of Rama I.

As you leave the cloisters of Wat Phra Kaew and move into the grounds of the **Grand Palace,** it's easy to see that the buildings here were greatly influenced by Western architecture, including Italian, French, and British motifs. The royal family moved from this royal residence to the nearby Chitlada Palace after the death of King Ananda in 1946.

Behind an intricately carved gate stands the **Phra Maha Monthien,** a complex of buildings, of which only the **Amarin Winichai Hall** is open to the public—it contains two elaborate thrones and is used officially only for coronations. Immediately west of this is the **Chakri Mahaprasad,** The Grand Palace Hall; built by British architects as a royal residence for Rama IV to commemorate the centennial of the Chakri dynasty, it features an unusually florid mix of Italian and Thai influences. The Thai-temple-style roof rests physically (and symbolically) on top of an otherwise European building. The only part of this building open to the public is a **Weapons Museum,** with entrances on either side of the main entrance, which displays a collection of spears, swords, and guns.

To the west of the Chakri Mahaprasad is the **Dusit Maha Prasat,** an audience hall built by Rama I that is now used officially only for royal funerals. Inside is a splendid throne inlaid with mother-of-pearl. On each of the four corners of the roof is a *garuda* (the half-human, half-bird steed of the God Rama, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu). The *garuda* symbolizes the king, who is considered a reincarnation of King Rama. This is the most photographed building in the Grand Palace and has become something of an icon of Thai architecture.

Beyond the Dusit Maha Prasat is a small cafe where you can find some refreshment, and, finally, the **Wat Phra Kaew Museum** houses some unusual exhibits, including elephant bones and costumes once used to adorn the Emerald Buddha.

East of the river, on Na Phra Lan Rd., near Sanam Luang. www.palaces.thai.net. Admission 350B. Price includes Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace, as well as admission to the Vimanmek Palace (in Dusit Park). Daily 8:30am–3:30pm; most individual buildings are closed to the public except on special days proclaimed by the King. Take the Chao Phraya Express Boat to the pier called Tha Chang, and then walk due east, then south.

Wat Po ★★★ Wat Po is among the most photogenic of all the *wats* (temples) in Bangkok; it's also one of the most active. Also known as the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, Wat Po was built by Rama I in the 16th century and is the oldest and largest Buddhist temple in Bangkok. The compound is immediately south of the Grand Palace, but it takes 15 minutes to walk from one to the other. The huge compound contains many important monuments, and the block to the south of Chetuphon Road is where monks reside.

Most people go straight to the enormous Reclining Buddha in the northwestern corner of the compound section. It is more than 43m (141 ft.) long and 15m (49 ft.) high, and was built during the mid-19th-century reign of Rama III. The statue is brick, covered with layers of plaster and gold leaf; the feet are inlaid with mother-of-pearl illustrations of 108 auspicious *laksanas* (characteristics) of the Buddha.

Outside, the grounds contain 91 *chedis* (stupas or mounds), four *viharns* (halls), and a *bot* (the central shrine in a Buddhist temple). Most impressive, aside from the Reclining Buddha, are the four main *chedis* dedicated to the first four Chakri kings and, nearby, the library.

The temple is considered Thailand's first public university. Long before the advent of literacy or books, many of its murals and sculptures were used to illustrate and instruct scholars on the basic principles of religion, science, and literature. Visitors still drop 1-satang coins in 108 bronze bowls—corresponding to the 108 auspicious characteristics of the Buddha—for good fortune, and to help the monks keep up the *wat.*

Wat Po is also home to one of the earliest Thai massage schools (http://watpomassage.com); a 30-minute Thai massage here costs 220B. These days, you'll find dozens of more

luxurious spas around town, costing up to 10 times as much for a similar treatment, but offering far more comfort. (See "Cultural & Wellness Pursuits," below.) You can learn about traditional Thai massage and medicine at the **Traditional Medical Practitioners Association Center,** an open-air hall to the rear of the *wat.* True Thai massage, such as that taught here, involves chiropractic manipulation and acupressure, as well as stretching, stroking, and kneading. Massage courses are available, but many overseas therapists prefer schools with tutors who speak more proficient English. There are also a few astrologers and palm readers available for consultation, though foreign visitors are bound to encounter language difficulties. For a small donation you can receive a blessing from a monk and a bracelet of braided colored string to commemorate the occasion. Donations go toward upkeep and renovations.

Maharaj Rd., near the river (about 1km/⅔ mile south of the Grand Palace). ✆ **02622-3551.** Admission 50B. Daily 8am–5pm; massages offered until 6pm. A short walk or taxi from Tha Thien pier.

The National Museum ★★ The National Museum, just a short (15-min.) walk north of the Grand Palace, is the country's central treasury of art and archaeology (32 branches are located throughout the provinces). Some of the buildings are themselves works of art.

The current museum was built as part of the Grand Palace complex, when the capital of Siam was moved from Thonburi to Bangkok in 1782. Originally the palace of Rama I's brother, the deputy king and appointed successor, it was called the Wang Na ("Palace at the Front"). The position of princely successor was eventually abolished, and Rama V had the palace converted into a museum in 1884. Thammasat University, the College of Dramatic Arts, and the National Theater were also built on the royal grounds, along with additional museum buildings.

To see the entire collection, take a free map at the ticket office and give yourself a few hours; if you prefer not to wander, plan to catch a weekly guided tour. Start with the **Thai History and the Prehistoric Galleries** in the first building. If you're short of time, proceed to the **Red House** behind it, a traditional 18th-century Thai building that was originally the living quarters of Princess Sri Sudarak, sister of King Rama I. It contains many personal effects originally owned by the princess.

Another essential stop is the **Buddhaisawan Chapel,** built in 1795 to house one of Thailand's most revered Buddha images, brought here from its original home in Chiang Mai. The chapel is an exquisite example of Buddhist temple architecture.

From the chapel, work your way back through the main building of the royal palace to see the gold jewelry, some from the royal collections, and the Thai ceramics, including many pieces in the five-color *Bencharong* style. The **Old Transportation Room** contains ivory carvings, elephant chairs, and royal palanquins. There are also rooms full of all kinds of memorabilia: royal emblems and insignia, stone and wood carvings, costumes, textiles, musical instruments, and Buddhist religious artifacts. Fine art and sculpture are found in the newer galleries at the rear of the museum compound.

Na Phra That Rd. ✆ **02224-1333.** www.thailandmuseum.com. Admission 200B. Wed–Sun 9am–3:30pm. Free English-language tours Wed–Thurs 9:30am. Chao Phraya Express Boat to Tha Chang pier; about 1km/⅔ mile north of the Grand Palace.

Vimanmek Teak Mansion ★★ Your ticket to the Grand Palace will also get you in to visit King Chulalongkorn's stunning golden teakwood mansion, often called Vimanmek Palace, situated in delightful Dusit Palace Park. Built in 1901, this mansion once

stood on the small island of Ko Si Chang and was restored in 1982 for Bangkok's bicentennial. It's now a private museum with a collection of the royal family's memorabilia. Despite the (sometimes spotty) standard of English employed by the guides, the hour-long tour here does take you through over 80 exquisite apartments and rooms. Also in Dusit Park is the original **Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall,** housing a display of Thai handicrafts, and buildings displaying photographs, clocks, fabrics, royal carriages, and other regalia.

193/2 Ratchawithi Rd., Dusit Palace Park (opposite the Dusit Zoo). www.vimanmek.com. Admission 100B; free if you purchase a joint ticket for the Grand Palace. Daily 9:30am–3:15pm. Taxi from Tha Thien pier.

Jim Thompson's House ★ American architect Jim Thompson settled in Bangkok after World War II, where he worked for American Intelligence and became fascinated by Thai culture and artifacts. He dedicated himself to reviving Thailand's ebbing silk industry, bringing in new dyes to create the bright pinks, yellows, and turquoises we see sold today. It was Jim Thompson silks that were used by costumier Irene Sharaff for the Oscar-winning movie *The King & I,* starring Yul Brynner. Mr. Thompson mysteriously disappeared in 1967 while vacationing in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. Despite extensive investigations, his disappearance has never been resolved.

All visitors must join a guided tour of the house, which contains a splendid collection of Khmer sculpture, Chinese porcelain, and Burmese carvings and scroll paintings. In some rooms, the floor is made of Italian marble, but the wall panels are pegged teak. The walls lean slightly inward to help stabilize the structure; the original houses were built on stilts without foundations. The residence is composed of a cluster of six teak and *theng* (a wood harder than teak) houses from central Thailand, which were rebuilt—with a few Western facilities—in what must have been a lovely garden, next to what is today an oily, polluted *klong*. No doubt it would have been magnificent 50 years ago.

Rounding out the attractions here are a relaxing cafe, a gallery space with a revolving collection of local artists' works, and of course a shop featuring silk garments, bags, and scarves.

6 Soi Kasemsan. ✆ **02216-7368.** www.jimthompsonhouse.com. Admission 100B. Daily 9am–5pm. On a small *soi* off Rama I Rd., near the National Stadium BTS.

Erawan Shrine ★★ The Erawan Shrine is not old, but it is an interesting testament to the belief in spirits, in Thai society. Built in 1956, next to what is now the Grand Hyatt Erawan, it stands defiantly at the center of a busy corner plot, right next to fume-belching buses and overshadowed by the BTS. In a sumptuous spirit house at the center of this yard, a gilded statue of the four-faced Hindu god of creation, Brahma, named Phra Phrom in Thai, is enshrined. Its construction is believed to have put a stop to all the accidental deaths of workers constructing the hotel site, and due to such mystic powers, it is today one of the most revered spots in the kingdom. The area is crowded with worshipers wafting bunches of incense and praying for success in business or love. Even taxi drivers raise their hands from the steering wheel to give a *wai* as they pass by. The shrine made news a while back, when a mentally deranged Thai man decided to take an ax to the statue. As painful testament to the depth of Thais' devotion to the spirits (and a pitiful lesson in human rights), the onlookers turned on him and beat him to death in broad daylight.

On the corner of Rama I and Ratchadamri Rd. (next to the Grand Hyatt Erawan). No entrance fee (from 20B for incense and flowers). Daily dawn–8pm. Phloen Chit BTS.

Royal Barge Museum ★★★ If you've hired a longtail boat on the Chao Phraya, stop by this unique museum housing the sumptuous royal barges. These elaborately decorated sailing vessels—the largest measures over 46m (151 ft.)—are used by the royal family on state occasions or for religious ceremonies. The king's personal barge, the *Suphannahong,* has a swanlike neck and central chamber; the boat itself is decorated with scarlet and gold carvings of fearsome mythological beasts.

If you can't make it to the royal barges, there is a smaller display of barges at the National Museum (see above).

On the west bank of the river, on Klong Bangkok Noi (canal), north of the Phra Pinklao Bridge. ✆ **02424-0004.** www.thailandmuseum.com. Admission 100B adults, 100B extra for cameras. Daily 9am–5pm. Taxi or cross-river ferry from Tha Phra Arthit.

Museum of Siam ★ Kids Bangkok's newest museum is conveniently located in a grand old colonial building just a short walk from the Grand Palace and Wat Po, so it is worth considering while you're in this part of town, especially if you have kids with you, as there are so many hands-on exhibits. To begin, visitors are shown a short video contrasting the lives of traditional and modern Thais, and then over the three floors of displays, the museum attempts to answer the question "What is Thainess?" by looking at key aspects of the country's evolution. There are rooms dedicated to the importance of rice and bamboo in Thai culture, and there's also a chance to practice your cannon-firing skills and dress up in Edwardian clothes for a period snapshot.

4 Sanam Chai Rd. ✆ **02622-2599.** Admission 300B, free for children 14 and under and seniors 60 and over. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Express boat to Tha Thien, walk east to Sanamchai Rd, then 1 block south.

Wang Suan Pakkad Finds Wang Suan Pakkad ("Palace of the Lettuce Garden") is one of Bangkok's most delightful retreats. This peaceful oasis was the home of Princess Chumbhon of Nakhon Sawan, an avid art collector and one of the country's most dedicated archaeologists—credited with having partly financed the excavations at Ban Chiang I in 1967. In 1952, five 19th-century teak houses were moved from Chiang Mai and rebuilt in a beautifully landscaped garden on a private *klong,* separated by a high wall from the tumult of Bangkok's streets. The **Lacquer Pavilion** (moved here in 1958) came from a monastery grounds and was a birthday present from the prince to the princess.

The balance of the collection here is diverse, with Khmer sculpture, ivory boxes, and some marvelous prints by European artists depicting images of Siam before the country opened to the Western world. There is an entire room of objects from the Ban Chiang site, including pottery and jewelry. Look out for a superb Buddha head, from Ayutthaya, and an example of a royal barge, outside in a shed in the garden. Be sure to ask to see the pavilion housing the princess's collection of Thai and Chinese ceramics. The gift shop at Wang Suan Pakkad offers reproductions, and prices are quite reasonable.

352 Sri Ayutthaya Rd. (btw. Phayathai and Ratchaprarop rds.). ✆ **02245-4934.** www.suanpakkad.com. Admission 100B adults, 50B children, including material for a self-guided tour of grounds and collections. Daily 9am–4pm. 10-min. walk from Phaya Thai BTS.

Siam Society The 19th-century Kamthieng House, on the grounds of the Siam Society Headquarters, was a rice farmer's teak house, transplanted from the banks of Chiang Mai's Ping River. Its collection, organized with financial help from the Asia and Rockefeller foundations, is oriented toward ethnographic objects illustrating the culture of everyday life. Many agricultural and domestic items, including woven fish baskets and terra-cotta pots, are on display, and there's an interesting exhibit on the Chao Vieng, or city dwellers, from the northern Lanna Thai kingdom.

Avoiding the Touts

Tourists are harangued going in and out of the major sites around the Grand Palace, and sadly this area is now famous for its scam artists. Avoid unnecessary frustration by not engaging with these characters just as you would at home. Visitors are frequently told that sites are "closed" by "helpful" types, who then suggest alternate destinations. This is the start of the famous **"Bangkok shopping tour scam."** If you are approached by a stranger, whether it's someone purporting to be a "guide," or a tuk-tuk driver in this area, just say "no thanks" and walk away. If you end up riding a tuk-tuk near these main sites, make sure you've agreed to a price with the driver and insist on "*No* shopping." If you have any problems, don't hesitate to use the word *poleet* (police in Thai), or call the Tourist Police at ✆ **1155.**

Walking through the small but lush grounds, which are landscaped like a northern Thai garden, offers respite from the Asok intersection, just behind the hedge. The Siam Society also supports an excellent library and gallery, with information on nearly every aspect of Thai society, concentrating on regional culture. Check newspapers for talks and tours given by experts.

131 Soi Asok (north of Sukhumvit on Soi 21). ✆ **02661-6470.** www.siam-society.org. Admission 100B adults, 50B children. Tues–Sat 9am–5pm. 10-min. walk from Asok BTS station.

3 OTHER IMPORTANT WATS

Bangkok's many temples are each unique and inspiring. If you can see only a few, pay attention to the star ratings and hit the highlights (Wat Phra Kaew is listed in the preceding section due to its location within the Grand Palace compound). But while the big temples of Bangkok are highly recommended, don't pass up smaller neighborhood temples, where you have a good chance of learning about Buddhism in daily practice. Early morning is a good time to visit temples: the air is cool, monks busy themselves with morning activities, and the complexes are generally less crowded.

Thai people make regular offerings to temples and monasteries as an act of merit-making. Supporting the *sangha,* or monkhood, brings one closer to Buddhist ideals and increases the likelihood of a better life beyond this one. Many shops near temples sell saffron-colored pails filled with everyday supplies such as toothbrushes, soap, and other common necessities, and Thais bring these and other gifts as offerings to Buddhist mendicants as a way of gaining good graces. If you get up very early, you may even see a morning alms collection by (often barefoot) monks carrying their bowls around the neighborhood.

Small monetary contributions (the amount is up to you) are welcome at any temple, though the better-known temples already charge an admission fee. Devotions at a temple involve bowing three times, placing the forehead on the ground at the foot of the Buddha, and lighting candles and incense and chanting. Tourists are welcome to participate, but they are asked to pay particular attention to proper dress—take off your shoes and avoid baring your shoulders, thighs, upper arms, or back. If you kneel or sit to pay your respects, take care not to point your feet toward the Buddha images.

Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) ★★★ Formerly known as Wat Jaeng, the 79m-high (260-ft.), Khmer-inspired tower was renamed the "Temple of Dawn," by King Thaksin, Bangkok's founder. He was keen to signal the rise of a new kingdom after Ayutthaya was decimated, and so borrowed the name—which means dawn—from the Hindu God, Aruna. Fittingly, it's at its most wondrous as the sun rises and sets.

The original tower was only 15m (49 ft.) high but was expanded during the rule of Rama III (1824–51) to its current height. The exterior is decorated with flower and decorative motifs made of ceramic shards donated to the monastery by local people, at the request of the King. At the base of the complex are Chinese stone statues, once used as ballast in trading ships, which were gifts from Chinese merchants.

You can climb the central *prang,* but be warned: The steps are treacherously narrow and steep—and even more precarious coming down—so cling to the rail at the side. If you go up, notice the Hindu gods atop the three-headed elephants. The view of the river, Wat Po, and Grand Palace is well worth the climb. Be sure to walk to the back of the tower to the monks' living quarters, a tranquil world far from the bustle of Bangkok's busy streets.

West bank of the Chao Phraya, opposite Tha Thien Pier. www.watarun.org. Admission 50B. Daily 9am–5:30pm. Take a water taxi from Tha Tien Pier (near Wat Po), or cross the Phra Pinklao Bridge and follow the river south on Arun Amarin Rd.

Wat Benchamabophit (the Marble Temple) ★ Wat Benchamabophit, called the Marble Temple because of the white Carrara marble of which it is built, is an early-20th-century temple designed during the rule of Rama V. It is the most modern and one of the most beautiful of Bangkok's royal *wats.* Unlike the older complexes, there's no truly monumental *viharn* or *chedi* dominating the grounds. Many smaller buildings reflect a melding of European materials and designs with traditional Thai religious architecture. Even the courtyards are paved with polished white marble. Walk inside the compound, beyond the main *bot,* to view the many Buddha images that adopt a wide variety of postures. During early mornings, monks chant in the main chapel, sometimes so intensely that it seems as if the temple is going to lift off.

Sri Ayutthaya Rd. (south of the Assembly Building, near Chitralada Palace). Admission 20B. Daily 8am–5pm. Taxis from Phaya Thai BTS.

Wat Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic) Built to house a relic of the Buddha, Wat Mahathat is one of Bangkok's oldest shrines and the headquarters for Thailand's largest monastic order. It's also the Center for Vipassana Meditation, at the city's Buddhist University, which offers some programs in English. (See "Cultural & Wellness Pursuits," below, for more information about courses.)

Adjacent to it, between Maharaj Road and the river, is the city's biggest **amulet market,** where a fantastic array of religious amulets, charms, talismans, and traditional medicine is sold. Each amulet brings a specific kind of luck—to get the girl, to pass your exams, to keep bugs out of your rice stock, or to ward off your mother-in-law—so if you buy one, choose carefully. (The newer amulet market is part of Wat Ratchanada, off the intersection of Mahachai and Ratchadamnoen Klang roads, across from Wat Saket.)

Na Phra That Rd. (near Sanam Luang Park, btw. the Grand Palace and the National Museum). ✆ **02222-6011.** Donations welcome. Daily 9am–5pm. Water taxi to Tha Maharaj.

Wat Saket (The Golden Mount) ★ Wat Saket is easily recognized by its golden *chedi,* atop a fortresslike hill near busy Ratchadamnoen Road and Banglampoo. King Rama I restored the *wat,* and 30,000 bodies were brought here during a plague in the

reign of Rama II. The hill, which is almost 80m (262 ft.) high, is an artificial construction, begun during the reign of Rama III. Rama IV brought in 1,000 teak logs to shore it up because it was sinking into the swampy ground. Rama V built the golden *chedi* to house a relic of Buddha, given to him by the British. The concrete walls were added during World War II to keep the structure from collapsing.

The Golden Mount is interesting for its vistas of Rattanakosin Island and the rooftops of Bangkok and is beautifully lit at night. Every late October to mid-November (for 9 days around the full moon), Wat Saket hosts Bangkok's most important temple fair, when the Golden Mount is wrapped with red cloth and a carnival erupts around it, with food, trinket stalls, and theatrical performances.

Ratchadamnoen Klang and Boripihat roads. Entrance to the *wat* is free; admission to the Golden Mount is 10B. Donations welcome. Daily 8am–5pm. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT.

Wat Suthat and the Giant Swing This temple is among the oldest and largest in Bangkok, and Somerset Maugham declared its roofline the most beautiful. It was begun by Rama I and finished by Rama III; Rama II carved the panels for the *viharn* doors. It houses the beautiful 14th-century Phra Buddha Shakyamuni, a Buddha image that was brought from Sukhothai. The ashes of King Rama VIII, Ananda Mahidol, brother of the current king, are contained in its base. The wall paintings for which it is known were created during Rama III's reign.

Outside the *viharn* stand many Chinese pagodas, bronze horses, and figures of Chinese soldiers. The most important religious association, however, is with the Brahman priests who officiate at important state ceremonies, and there are two Hindu shrines nearby. To the northwest, across the street, is the Deva Sathan, which contains images of Shiva and Ganesh; and to the east, the smaller Saan Jao Phitsanu is dedicated to Vishnu. The huge teak arch—also carved by Rama II—in front is all that remains of an original giant swing, which was used until 1932 to celebrate and thank Shiva for a bountiful rice harvest, and to ask for the god's blessing on the next. The Minister of Rice, accompanied by hundreds of Brahman holy men, would lead a parade around the city walls to the temple precinct. Teams of men would ride the swing on arcs as high as 25m (82 ft.) in the air, trying to grab a bag of silver coins with their teeth. Due to injuries and deaths, the dangerous swing ceremony has been discontinued, but the thanksgiving festival is still celebrated in mid-December, after the rice harvest.

Sao Chingcha Square (near the intersection of Bamrung Mueang and Thi Thong rds.). ✆ **02222-6935.** Admission 20B. Daily 9am–9pm. Taxi from Hua Lamphong MRT.

Wat Traimit (The Golden Buddha) Wat Traimit, thought to date from the 13th century, would hardly rate a second glance if not for its astonishing Buddha image, which is nearly 3m (9¾ ft.) high, weighs over 5 tons, and is believed to be cast of solid gold. It was discovered by accident in 1957 when, covered by a plaster image, it was dropped from a crane during a move. The impact shattered the outer shell, revealing the shining gold beneath. This powerful image is truly dazzling and is thought to have been cast during the Sukhothai period. It was perhaps covered with plaster to hide it from Burmese invaders. Pieces of the stucco are also on display at the site.

Traimit Rd. (west of Hua Lamphong Station, just west of the intersection of Krung Kasem and Rama IV rds.). Admission 20B. Donations welcome. Daily 9am–5pm. Walk southwest on Traimit Rd., look for a school on the right with a playground; the *wat* is up a flight of stairs overlooking the school. 2-min. walk from Hua Lamphong MRT.

4 CULTURAL & WELLNESS PURSUITS

Culture is all around you in Thailand—and there are ample opportunities to take part in the daily activities, festivals, ceremonies, events, and practices that weave the fabric of this society. Keep an eye on free magazines, such as *BK Magazine,* or local newspapers, *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post,* for major events during your stay. (A calendar of events is listed in chapter 3, "Planning Your Trip to Thailand.") You may want to check with the **TAT** (✆ **1155**) or the **Bangkok Tourism Bureau** (✆ **02225-7612**), though these organizations may not always be as well informed as the local press. The best part of Thai festivals is that, whether getting soaked by buckets of water at Songkran or watching candlelit floats drift downstream at Loy Krathong, foreign visitors are usually invited to join in. Thais are very proud of their cultural heritage, and opportunities abound to learn and participate.

THAI COOKING

Fancy a chance to take back some of the delicious recipes you have been feasting on? Thai cooking is fun and easy, and there are a few good hands-on courses in Bangkok. You'll learn about Thai herbs, spices, and unique local produce. You'll never look at a produce market the same again. Lectures on Thai regional cuisine, cooking techniques, and menu planning complement classroom exercises to prepare all your favorite dishes. The best part is afterward, when you get to eat them.

- **The Oriental Cooking School** ★★★ is located in a quaint colonial house across the river from the famed hotel. Morning courses run daily (except Sun), and end with lunch. Their chefs are excellent, and you'll learn, through demonstration and practice, every aspect of Thai cooking. The course is open to anyone from beginner to expert. Different dishes are taught each day, so you can attend for a week and always learn something new. The cost is 4,000B person, per day. Call the hotel at ✆ **02659-9000.**
- **The Blue Elephant** ★★ is part of a large, Belgian-owned Thai restaurant chain popular throughout Europe. The cookery school stands in the same locale as the restaurant, a yellow-painted mansion close to the Surasak BTS. Classes begin at 8:45am, with a visit to the market to pick up fresh ingredients for the day. Back in the classroom, you'll first watch demonstrations before stepping up to your own cooking station to practice what you've learned under the watchful eye of a teacher. Afterward, you can share your creations with the rest of the class, as part of a delicious lunch spread. Visit them at 233 S. Sathorn Rd., just below Surasak BTS, or call ✆ **02673-9353** (www.blueelephant.com). One-day (group) courses cost 2,800B per person; private classes are also available.
- The woman behind **Mrs. Balbir's** ★★ is hilarious, dedicated, and an indefatigable charity worker as well as a TV star. The giggles that abound in the home of this regionally acclaimed, Malaysian-born chef are all part of the fun. Because Vinder Balbir is fluent in several languages (including English and Thai), these lessons are much more informative and interactive than most. She will carefully explain why a particular type of herb is required or what ingredients can be used as replacements in your home country. True to her ethnic roots, she can also teach fabulous Punjabi cuisine, as well as Thai. After an afternoon (2–6pm) spent cooking with Mrs. B., you'll leave filled with good humor and great food. Courses start at 2,000B per person and take place

above her restaurant (✆ **02651-0498**), in the first sub-*soi* at 155/1–2 Sukhumvit Rd. (Soi 11, close to Nana BTS). For all course inquiries, call her restaurant Tuesday to Sunday from 11am to 2pm or 6 to 11pm. Or see the website www.mrsbalbir.com.

THAI MASSAGE

A traditional Thai massage involves manipulating your limbs to stretch each muscle and then applying acupressure techniques to loosen up tense muscles and start energy flowing. Your body will be twisted, pulled, and sometimes pounded in the process.

For Thai massage to be beneficial, it should be fairly rigorous and at times it can be punishing: If the therapist is loath to use pressure from the start, you'll know you are wasting your time. If you chose a streetside spa, chose one away from tourist areas—such as Khao San, Sukhumvit, or Silom roads, where Thais are patrons. ***Note:*** Many massage parlors on Silom and Sukhumvit roads are fronts for brothels, where (male) tourists will be propositioned for a variety of sexual favors.

There are countless spas and massage parlors around Bangkok; many offer good services at very reasonable rates, such as the humongous **Healthland** (120 Sathorn Rd.; ✆ **02637-8883;** www.healthlandspa.com), which operates a bit like a neon-lit, spa production line, or the quieter **Ruen-Nuad** (✆ **02632-2662**), a small but homey spa tucked in a small *soi* opposite the BNH Hospital on Soi Convent (btw. Silom and Sathorn rds.). It offers excellent foot massages as well as authentic Thai massage.

Wat Po (p. 126) has long been promoted as the only place to learn Thai massage, and though it's cheaper than some, it's still pretty overrated. These days, better options abound. Good courses are offered at the Sukhumvit Road location of the award-winning **Chiva-Som Academy** ★★ (✆ **02711-5270;** www.chivasomacademy.com). These cover therapies such as Reiki and other alternative treatments; but Bangkok's finest spas are almost always those in the most respected hotels, where time and money are invested in training and language skills. **The Banyan Tree Spa** ★★★ (✆ **02679-10524;** www.banyantree.com) and the **Oriental Spa & Ayurvedic Penthouse** ★★★ (✆ **02659-9000;** www.mandarin-oriental.com/bangkok/spa) are two of the finest places going, but they come with a hefty price—you're paying for expertise that leaves your muscles soothed, gets your blood flowing, and gives you a feeling of unparalleled well-being.

Budget spas that use untrained staff with no English skills make for not just an unpleasant experience, but a potentially painful one. If your masseuse doesn't understand a word of English, or there is no one to help translate your needs or aspects of your current health, such as varicose veins or respiratory or skin conditions, you are taking a serious risk.

THAI BOXING

Muaythai, or Thai boxing, is Thailand's national sport, and a visit to either of the two venues in Bangkok, or in towns all over Thailand, displays a very different side to the usually gentle Thai culture. The mystical prebout rituals, live musical performances, and, of course, the frenetic gambling, appeal to fans of this raw, and often bloody, spectacle. In Bangkok, catch up to 15 bouts nightly at either of two stadiums. The **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (Ratchadamnoen Nok Ave.; ✆ **02281-4205**) hosts fights on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday, while the **Lumphini Stadium,** on Rama IV Road (✆ **02251-4303**), has bouts on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday. Tickets cost 1,000B to 2,000B at both venues; ringside seats are only bookable in advance. In the second-class seats, you may still have a good view of the action in the ring and will see close-ups of the gambling action. The guys with multiple cellphones screaming and shouting often overshadow the action in the ring.

Kids Snake Sightings

Lovers of all things reptilian can witness a sight rarely encountered anywhere else. The **Red Cross Snake Farm,** at 1871 Rama IV Rd. (✆ **02252-0161**), is located in the heart of Bangkok. Don't expect a bucolic "farm" setting; in fact, this is nothing more than a cluster of pretty colonial buildings, in the heart of the city, that provide a research institute for the study of venomous snakes. Established in 1923, this was the second facility of its type in the world. For a fee of 200B, you can see slide shows and snake-handling demonstrations weekdays at 11am and 2:30pm, and on weekends and holidays at 11am. You can also watch the handlers work with deadly cobras and (equally poisonous) banded kraits, with demonstrations of venom milking. The venom is later injected into horses, which produce antivenin for the treatment of snakebites in humans. The Red Cross Snake Farm sells medical guides and will also inoculate you against such maladies as typhoid, cholera, and smallpox, in their clinic. The institute is open daily Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm, Saturday and Sunday 8:30am to noon.

Keen to try some kicks and punches yourself? Check out the website www.muaythai.com, which details training camps for rookies.

MEDITATION

The House of Dhamma (✆ **02511-0439;** www.houseofdhamma.com) and **Wat Mahathat** (see "Other Important Wats," earlier in this chapter) serve as meditation centers for overseas students of Buddhism. The latter is one of Thailand's largest Buddhist Universities and has become a popular center for meditation lessons, with English-speaking monks overseeing students of *Vipassana,* also called Insight Meditation. Instruction is held daily; call ahead (✆ **02222-6011**) to get the schedule and to make an appointment. Both offer good introductions to basic techniques.

THAI LANGUAGE STUDY

So you've learned your "Sawadee-khrup" or "Sawadee-kha," but want to take it a little farther from there? Thais are very gracious and welcoming with foreigners butchering their language (the tones make you pronounce the most mundane phrases in laughable ways), but there are a few good schools in Bangkok to help you get the pronunciations right. Among the many offered, try the superlative **American University Alumni Language Center** (179 Ratchadamri Rd.; ✆ **02252-8170**) or the **Union Language School** (7th Floor, 328 CCT Office Building, Phayathai Rd.; ✆ **02214-6033**).

5 STAYING ACTIVE

FITNESS

All the finest five-star properties in town boast quality fitness centers complete with personal trainers and top equipment. In addition, **California WOW** (www.californiawowx.com) has an enormous club just on the corner of Silom Road and Soi Convent, at Liberty Square (✆ **02631-1122**), and another at Siam Paragon mall (✆ **02627-5999**);

expect to pay 800B daily for access to both locations. Don't be intimidated into paying anything more than you can afford—the reps use famously hard-sell tactics. The upscale Ascott-serviced residences down on Sathorn Road benefit from the members-only **Cascade Club** (✆ **02676-6969;** www.cascadeclubandspa.com), a stunning state-of-the-art gym, which comes with two studios for Pilates and aerobics, a shady outdoor pool, and a spa. Day passes in 2009 cost 535B, a good value if you love long workouts. There are also several branches of **Fitness First,** such as the one at Landmark Plaza, on Sukhumvit Road (✆ **02653-2424;** www.fitnessfirst.co.th), which come equipped with all the latest in fitness equipment, and offer a day rate of 1,070B.

If these places listed are too expensive, check the three- to four-star hotels in your district; many offer day passes for as little as 350B.

GOLF

Various golf courses lie close to the city, a number of which are championship quality. Due to their huge popularity, access is sometimes limited. Visitors can get around this by booking upscale packages offered by hotel concierges or agents, such as **Golf A La Cart** (www.golfalacart-thailand.com), who can arrange access during the busiest seasons. These fully inclusive deals include car transfer and all fees.

- **Thai Country Club** (✆ **02651-5300** or 03857-0234; www.thaicountryclub.com), run by the Peninsula Hotel, is praised for its consistent greens and sumptuous clubhouse. This stunning 18-hole course lies just 45 minutes southwest of Bangkok. The following fees refer to low/high season rates: Greens fees are 3,600B–4,800B on weekdays, 4,800B–6,000B on weekends. Note that visitors' hours on weekends are restricted.
- **Pinehurst Golf & Country Club** (✆ **02516-8679;** www.pinehurst.co.th), located in Pathum Thani, is a popular 27-hole course that served as the venue for the 1992 Johnnie Walker Classic. Greens fees on weekdays are 1,800B, on weekends 2,400B.
- **Bangkok Golf Club** (✆ **02501-2828;** www.golf.th.com), a short 35-minute drive from the city center, is an 18-hole course that's always popular and regularly plays host to local and regional tournaments. Night golf is available. Greens fees are 1,700B on weekdays and 2,600B on weekends.

HORSE RACING

The prestigious **Royal Bangkok Sports Club** (RBSC; ✆ **02652-5000;** www.rbsc.org) holds horse-racing events that are open to the paying public every second Sunday of the month. The grounds occupy a prime spot on Henri Dunant Road, opposite Chulalongkorn University, north of Rama IV Road. Nominal admission fees and minimum bets apply.

YOGA

Apart from the many hotels in town that schedule regular yoga classes, some downtown studios may offer special packages for visitors on extended stays. Expect to pay up to 3,000B. One such studio is **Absolute Yoga** (✆ **02252-4400;** www.absoluteyogabangkok.com), with many branches including one in Amarin Plaza, close to the Grand Hyatt Erawan, on Ploenchit Road. Hot yoga, sometimes called bikram yoga (where yoga is practiced in a room at saunalike temperatures), is available at **Absolute Yoga**'s Soi Piphat 2 branch (✆ **02636-8342**). There are numerous daily classes and schedules are posted on the website. Wear loose workout gear, bring a big bottle of water, and be ready to

sweat buckets. **Y**oga Elements Studio (✆ **02655-5671;** www.yogaelements.com), on the 23rd floor of the Vanissa Building, just behind Central Chidlom department store on Soi Chidlom (5 min. from Chit Lom BTS), is another locally run studio with a wide variety of yoga classes. The big commercial fitness clubs in town, such as **California WOW** (see above), also offer yoga and Pilates.

6 SHOPPING

Bangkok pulls in shoppers from all over the world, clamoring to find bargains at the endless streetside stalls or in the new ultrachic, brand-name boutiques. High-quality goods at very reasonable prices are available, if you look hard, but any discussion of shopping in Thailand must be prefaced with a warning about shopping scams; see p. 33, in chapter 2, for info. If you encounter problems with any merchants, take their business card and contact the **Tourist Police** (✆ **0678-6800,** or the hot line at 1155), or report the incident to your hotel concierge.

WHERE TO BUY

Shopping is a real adventure in Bangkok. The big markets are a visual onslaught (don't miss the Weekend Market; see later in this chapter), and there are great upmarket gift and antiques dealers as well as small souvenir stalls scattered about town. Nancy Chandler's *Map of Bangkok* is available at bookstores throughout the city for 250B and has detailed insets of places such as Chinatown and the sprawling Weekend Market. Below is a breakdown according to the top shopping areas.

Toward the River

Charoen Krung (New) Road is full of goodies: antiques stores, jewelry wholesalers, and funky little galleries. Keep your eyes open, and you might stumble on a gem as you browse shop windows, especially at such places as **Lek Gallery,** at number 1124–1134 (✆ **02639-5871**), near Soi 30, which has decorative items and furniture that are downright sexy. The art and antiques shops at the low-rise mall known as **River City** (✆ **02237-0077**), on Charoen Krung Soi 38, have a great selection of porcelain, wood carvings, jewelry, and silk, but some outlets are overpriced (avoid the tailoring shops here, as the low standards of craftsmanship do not warrant the big bucks). If you're in the market for antiques, you need to know your stuff, as rumors warn of many fakes on sale. Close to the Oriental Hotel is **OP Place** (✆ **02266-0186**), featuring a heap of high-end shopping venues, from stores selling expensive designer luggage to jet-setter jewelry stores and amazing antiques, carpets, and fine silver tableware (much of which is Tiffany-like quality). In the same *soi* as the Oriental Hotel are some of the city's better tailoring shops and, in the **Mandarin Oriental** (p. 90) itself, look out for exquisite one-off jewelry pieces at **Lotus Arts de Vivre,** or pop into the branch of **Jim Thompson's** for great silks.

Sukhumvit Road

This area is lined with shops from one end to the other, as well as some of Bangkok's biggest shopping malls (see "Department Stores & Shopping Plazas," below). For fine silk, stop in at **Almeta** (20/3 Sukhumvit Soi 23; ✆ **02204-1413** or 02258-4227; www.almeta.com), a rival to Jim Thompson's. **Celadon House,** at 8/3–8/5 Ratchadaphisek Rd. (✆ **02229-5193**), near the Asok BTS, carries attractive celadon ceramic.

For men's tailoring, there are many shops along Sukhumvit *sois* 11 and 19. Most ship your order off to have clothes made in a factory, and quality is iffy, so bargain like mad. **Ambassador Fashion** (28–28/1 Sukhumvit Soi 19; ✆ **02253-2993**) has been in the business for years and is near the Asok BTS.

At night, the entire road fills up with **night market** stalls. Down at Soi 5, you will find endless supplies of wooden toys, crafts, and suitcases. After Soi 11, the pavements get packed with clothes, souvenirs, and surf wear. At Soi 15, there's the excellent **Asia Books** (✆ **02252-7277**); it's close to **Robinson's Department Store** (✆ **02651-1533**), which is the place to shop for quality brands. It has a fair range of midrange luggage, children's wear, ladies' fashions, T-shirts, and brand-name sunglasses, though clothing sizes will not normally extend to oversized European or American sizes.

Silom & Surawong Roads

This area is packed with shopping malls and vendors—you'll find any number of jewelry shops, silk retailers, and plenty of touristy tailors, but few places in this area are top-notch. Check out the main store of **Jim Thompson's** (9 Surawong Rd.; ✆ **02632-8100**); a factory outlet is 5 minutes away down Surawong Road, as well as at 153 Sukhumvit Rd., Soi 93. **Silom Complex** (✆ **02632-1199**), next to Sala Daeng BTS, contains the **Central** department store (www.central.co.th), which sells well-known brands of casual clothing such as Giordano and Esprit. On the second floor of Central, there's a Marks & Spencer store from the U.K., selling food and clothing—it's a great stop if you can't find any local fashions that fit or if you need things such as thermal underwear for your return trip. Right across the road from Silom Complex is the 24-hour British pharmacy **Boots** (✆ **02233-0571**), which you should visit for such things as European prescription drugs and contact lens cleaner. **Watson's** (no phone), a similar Hong Kong–based pharmacy, is just at the entrance to Silom Complex.

The **Patpong Night Market** (p. 141), which runs between Silom and Surawong roads, sells mostly counterfeit goods.

WHAT TO BUY

Antiques

Buying antiques to take out of Thailand is tricky. Authentic antiques are more than 200 years old (they must date from the beginning of the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok), but these days most items are good reproductions that have been professionally "distressed"—even the Certificate of Authenticity can be a forgery. If you do find something real, remember that the Thai government has an interest in keeping authentic antiquities and sacred items in the country, and will require special permission for export.

By law, Buddha images are prohibited from export, except for religious or educational purposes; even in these instances, you'll still have to obtain permission from the **Department of Fine Arts** to remove them from Thailand. This rule is little enforced, though, and the focus is more on antique Buddhas than those you'll find in tourist markets. (Details on how to contact the Department of Fine Arts and file for permission is provided in chapter 3, on p. 37.)

Almost all the reputable antiques stores in Bangkok are along the endless **Charoen Krung (New) Road** (centered along the section on either side of the post office), but many of these are shamelessly priced for wealthier tourists, and most items are Chinese, not Thai. **River City** and **OP Place** are both convenient places to hunt for art and antiques, as you can hit several stores within an hour, but neither quality nor authenticity is guaranteed.

Department Stores & Shopping Plazas

Bangkok's downtown looks more and more like urban Tokyo these days. The size and opulence of Bangkok's many malls and shopping areas are often a shock to those who imagine Bangkok to be an exotic, impoverished destination. Sipping cappuccino at a Starbucks overlooking a busy city street may not be what you've come to Asia to find, but to many it is a comfort (especially after long trips in more rugged parts of the kingdom). The truth is that malls are focused as much on today's consumer-obsessed Thai youth as anywhere else you'll visit; these hallowed halls of materialism are (sadly) much closer to the pulse of the nation than the many temples foreign visitors are keen to experience. Malls are where most wealthy Thais hang out, meet friends, dine, and shop. I've listed some malls under "Where to Buy" above; below are some more highlights:

- **CentralWorld** (✆ **02635-1111**), on the corner of Rama I and Rachadamri roads, is a great place to buy slightly funkier upmarket brands and cool gadgets, as well as to visit some of the city's slickest Internet cafes. It contains Zen and Isetan stores and is crowned with a fab food hall and, of course, a bevy of cinemas. Open daily 10am to 9pm. The Chit Lom and Siam BTS stations are both nearby.
- **Emporium** (✆ **02269-1000**) stands proudly on the corner of Sukhumvit Soi 24. Bangkok's first luxury shopping mall, this old-timer still offers the top designer outlets from Gucci to Prada and Sony to Walt Disney (there are cinemas on the top floor). The food court on the top floor covers just about any craving. Open daily 10am to 10pm. It's connected to Phrom Phong BTS.
- **Erawan** (next to Grand Hyatt Erawan, at the corner of Ratchadamri and Rama I rds.; ✆ **02250-7777**) is a swanky, mercantile mecca that's truly glamorous but never crowded. Such brands as Coach rub shoulders with such fashion stores as Club 21 and the city's top watch shops. Drop in on Urban Kitchen, with a basement area that features a range of foodie shops and diners. The top floor is dedicated to an alternative health center, offering treatments such as colonic irrigation. Open daily 10am to 10pm. Take the Chit Lom BTS here.
- **Mah Boon Krong,** or **MBK** (✆ **02217-9111**), lies at the intersection of Rama 1 and Phayathai. This massive megamall, in fact, is a mass of small shops, fast-food joints, and tiny vendors—try to imagine a cross between a street market and a shopping mall. The **Tokyu Department Store** is within the mall, and it attracts teenagers and tourists due to its bargain-priced local fashions, accessories, and gadgets, along with its huge array of tourist souvenirs on the lower floor. Cinemas are at the top. Open daily 9am to 9pm. Take the BTS to the National Stadium.
- **Panthip Plaza** (✆ **02254-9797**), on Phetchaburi Road, is an older, rather scruffy mall that's dedicated to all things electronic. Among the shoddy bootleg software, there are stacks of innovative gadgets, as well as shops selling secondhand or new and affordable computers, mobile phones, or components for either. Not much English is spoken, but it may not matter if you are into IT and can speak fluent Nerdish. Open daily 10am to 8pm. It's a 10-minute walk from Ratchathewi BTS.
- **Siam Paragon** ★★ (✆ **02690-1000**), on Rama I Road, is one of those glitzy malls that just goes on and on. Downstairs is **Siam Ocean World,** where kids can watch the sharks swim; above are floors of brand-name stores such as Hermès, MNG, Zara, and Shanghai Tang. The mall also has an entire floor of fun eateries, as well as a top-class food hall, a department store, and even a gymnasium. Open daily 10am to 10pm. There's direct access via Siam BTS.

Fashion & Tailoring

Bangkok has some small, independent designers of its own, who create Thai-influenced fashions that look good back home. **Nagara, Kloset, Fly Now, Grey by Greyhound,** and **Anurak** are all well-established local labels producing great ready-to-wear items for men and women. It's certainly not Parisian haute couture, but the designs are fresh and original, and prices will be a fraction of those in designer boutiques back home. If you want really unique clothes or accessories, have a trawl around **Siam Square** for the latest Thai styles—but don't expect European sizes!

If you want to check out the more cutting-edge, contemporary Thai design scene, **Thong Lor** (Sukhumvit Soi 55) has a great array of yuppified boutiques catering to younger, well-heeled Thais. Such places as **J Avenue** (Thong Lor Soi 15), a small, trendy mall, and the yummy **Greyhound Café** (www.greyhoundcafe.co.th) there attracts Thailand's yuppies on weekends.

Tailors may be widespread in popular malls such as **River City** and in **Sukhumvit Road's Soi 11** and **19,** but remember, this is not Hong Kong and—as all the concierges of major hotels repeatedly attest—Thailand's back-street tailors aren't perfect. Men's shirts normally pose no serious problems, but ambitious ladies' wear can be a disaster when designs skills are limited and fabric quality is poor. Paying a knockdown price often leads to shoddy workmanship and cloth; don't risk the roughly 3,500B you'll have to pay when it all goes wrong. The rule of thumb is, expect to pay 60% of prices in Europe or the U.S. for something decent, and always schedule at least two fittings, with an English speaker present. Only very few places, such as **World Group** (✆ **02238-3344**), in Soi Oriental (off Charoen Krung Rd.), can cope with precise cutting or copying of garments. You will pay a high price for their expertise, though—around 15,000 to 30,000B.

Gifts, Crafts & Souvenirs

Street vendors throughout the city are a good source of affordable and fun souvenirs (though they are currently banned on Mon, for street cleaning). The best stalls are along **Sukhumvit Road,** beginning at Soi 4, and on **Khao San Road.** Little of the stuff sold there is unique, but the prices are great, and many people stock up on gifts such as mango wood bowls, chopsticks, candles, incense, or small decorative lamps made of mulberry paper or coconut shells. Impressive brass, bronze, and pewter items, as well as fine celadon (green ceramic ware), are all available in many outlets on **Sukhumvit and Charoen Krung (New) roads.**

Up on Sukhumvit Road, the **Emporium** (see above) boasts a dazzling range of beautiful crafts and textiles on its penultimate floor. **Mah Boon Krang** (MBK) has a lower ground floor, stuffed with very reasonably priced gifts and handicrafts, carvings, and castings. The North Thailand–based charity **Mae Fah Luang** has a boutique in **Suan Lum Night Market** (see "Market Goods," below), selling upmarket textiles and home decor items. If you are already on your way home, fear not—it also has duty-free boutiques located at Suvarnabhumi International Airport and a few of the larger provincial airports, such as Chiang Mai's.

Jewelry

Sapphires, rubies, garnets, turquoise, and zircons are mined in Thailand, and nearly every other stone you can think of is imported and cut here. Thai artisans are among the most skillful in the world; work in gold and silver is generally of high quality at very good value. If you're interested in a custom setting, bring a photo or drawing of what you'd like and prepare to discuss your ideas at length.

You'll find gemstone, silver, and gold stores in every part of town. Head to the **Silom Galleria** (✆ **02630-0944**) mall, on Silom Soi 19, for over 100 outlets specializing in jewelry, art, and antiques. Around **Charoen Krung (New) Road,** you'll find the wholesalers of gorgeous semiprecious stones. Gold is sold in **Chinatown;** try the lower end of **Silom and Khao San roads** for silver in bulk. The **Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences** (6th Floor, Jewelry Trade Center; 919/1 Silom Rd.; ✆ **02267-4315;** www.aigsthailand.com) is useful for verifying the quality of cut stones (although it's not an appraiser) and also runs courses in gem identification and jewelry design. The TAT (p. 133) and the Thai Gem and Jewelry Traders Association have created an organization called the **Jewel Fest Club** (www.jewelfest.com). Check out their website to find which shops are members of this reputable organization.

Market Goods

Visiting Bangkok's many markets is as much a cultural experience as it is a consumer experience; goods come in from all corners of the kingdom, and bargaining is a fast and furious experience. Smaller markets with fewer tourists are great for wandering. Try these: **Bangrak Wet Market,** behind the Shangri-La Hotel, is an early-morning gourmet's delight. **Pratunam Market,** at the intersection of Phetchaburi and Ratchaprarop roads, is a big wholesale center, with a vast array of inexpensive clothing. **Pak Klong Talad** ★★, near Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge), on the fringes of Chinatown, is home to Bangkok's cut-flower market, with huge bouquets of cut flowers passing through here all day and all night. Most tourist markets are generally open daily from 6–11pm; exceptions are noted below.

A word of warning: Cheap goods flood many markets in Thailand, and Bangkok is no exception. Most market stalls, such as those in Patpong, are filled with stalls of brand-name handbags, sneakers, and watches, all of which are fake. Though some tourists revel in getting cheap brand-name items for a few bucks, doing so can result in dire consequences. See p. 33 in chapter 2 for info.

Khao San Road Area The nighttime stalls on Khao San Road cater to young travelers, and as such, this is where you'll find the funkiest bits and bobs in town. From hip-hop fashions and cool T-shirts, to silver wares or original artworks, this is your place. It's worth the trip for the atmosphere alone—bass-thumping clubs, busy bars, and Internet cafes attract crowds of tattooed, pierced, and, yes, plain ordinary travelers, going or coming from all corners of Asia. The area just north of Khao San Road is a maze of small department stores, shops, and very affordable retail goods. Open daily from 11am to 11pm. In Banglampoo, just north of the Grand Palace area and Ratchadamnoen Rd.

Patpong Night Market The Patpong area is famous for its bars, neon lights, girls, sex shows, and massage parlors, but it also hosts a bustling Night Market along the central streets (hemmed in on all sides by go-go bars and sex-show clubs) that sell mostly faux brands: pirated CDs and tapes, designer knockoffs, copy watches (including fake Rolexes that I've gotten some good reports on), leather goods stamped with desirable logos (sure to hold up better than cardboard)—not especially cheap, but lively and fun, especially if you enjoy crowds and the challenge of hard bargaining. Open daily after sundown. Patpong Soi 1, btw. Silom and Surawong rds.

Suan Lum Night Market ★ This large night market, which gets started daily around 6pm, is your best bet for souvenir shopping, if you can't make it to the Weekend Market. It features thousands of booths selling everything imaginable, such as carved

soaps, T-shirts, colorful lamps, ceramics, and original art, but is smaller and more manageable than mighty Chatuchak. Occupying a prime piece of real estate, it has been threatened with closure almost since it opened, but in the current difficult economic climate it is proving a good source of tourist dollars. There's also a food court, a beer garden, and nightly live music. Main entrance opposite Lumphini Park on Witthayu (Wireless) Road, near the junction with Rama IV Road (Lumphini MRT).

Weekend Market (Chatuchak) ★★ This mother of all markets, which is open on Saturdays and Sundays from 9am to 5pm, is filled with head-spinning numbers of stalls selling everything: souvenirs, art, antiques, fresh and dried seafood, vegetables and condiments, pottery, pets of every sort, orchids, and other exotic plants, clothing, and a host of strange exotic foods. A visit here is a great way to introduce yourself to the exotic sights, flavors, and colors of Thai life; and it is the best one-stop shop for all those souvenirs you haven't bought yet. In the hot season, try to get there early in the morning, before the heat, and leave by early afternoon, before the downpours. ***Hint:*** Hop off the BTS at Saphan Khwai and walk the one stop to the main market area, staying on the left (or west) side of the train. All along here you'll find some great antiques and jewelry stalls. Adjacent to the Mo Chit BTS, at the northern terminus of the BTS.

Silk

There are numerous silk outlets throughout the city, from shopping malls to the lobbies of international hotels. Synthetics are frequently sold as silk; if you're in doubt about a particular piece, select a thread and burn it—silk should smell like singed hair. Sometimes only the warp (lengthwise threads) is synthetic, because it is more uniform and easier to work with. For some of the city's priciest silk, try such outlets as **Jim Thompson's** (9 Surawong Rd., near Silom; ✆ **02632-8100**), or the Thai silk specialists **Almeta** (20/3, Sukhumvit Soi 23; ✆ **02204-1413** or 02258-4227). They can even offer "silk a la carte," whereby silk is woven to the customer's desired weight and dyed to a particular shade. Products include silk wall coverings, silk fashions, bed linen, and casual wear.

One of the best outlets for cottons from all over the world, as well as chiffons and silks, is the **Cynosure,** which was about to move into new premises at the time of this update. Check out their website (www.cynosurebangkok.com), for new contact details. Their products include ornate brocades, linens, and rainbow-hued satins, as well as top-class Chantilly laces, along with sequined and beaded fabrics. Expect to pay top price for what, in effect, is the cream of the crop.

7 BANGKOK AFTER DARK

Bangkok's reputation for rowdy nightlife tends to precede it; however, it's not all raunchy sex shows and public debauchery. There are plenty of nighttime cultural events, such as music, theater, puppetry performances, and orchestral maneuvers. For the hippest nightlife updates, check out *BK Magazine* (free and available at bookstores and restaurants). Featuring weekly listings of events as well as up-to-date info about the club scene, it is the best entertainment source in Bangkok. Both the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* also offer daily listings of cultural events and performance schedules.

THE PERFORMING ARTS

Most travelers experience the Thai performing arts at a commercially staged dance show in a hotel, sometimes accompanied by a Thai banquet; see "Dinner with Thai Dance," in chapter 6. Bangkok, however, does provide much more appetizing slices of theater, whether it is the avant-garde choreography seen at the **Patravadi Theater,** traditional puppet shows by **Joe Louis,** or international music recitals as part of annual festivals.

The National Theater, 1 Na Phra That Rd. (✆ **02224-1342**), presents demonstrations of Thai classical dancing and music, by performers from the School of Music and Dance in Bangkok, which are generally superior to those at the tourist restaurants and hotels. There are also performances by visiting ballet and theatrical companies. Call the TAT (p. 133) or check with your hotel for the current schedule.

The **Thailand Cultural Center,** Thiem Ruammit Road, off Ratchadaphisek Road, Huai Khwang (✆ **02247-0028**), is the largest performance center in town, offering a wide variety of programs. The Bangkok Symphony performs here during its short summer season. Other local and visiting companies also present theater and dance at the center.

Bangkok's unique contemporary dance theater, **Patravadi Theater,** at Soi Wat Rakheng, off Anamarin Road (✆ **02412-7287;** www.patravaditheatre.com), occupies a laid-back arty corner of the Thonburi district, and can be relied upon to challenge cultural conformity by putting on inspiring performances that combine all manner of Thai and international dance forms, including dazzling *likay* (similar to the style of Broadway musicals). Overseen since its founding by Patravadi Mejudhon, a former Thai classical dancer now in her late 50s, the theater is well worth the trip for those fascinated by Thailand's performing arts.

For some years, the **Joe Louis Theater** has been holding nightly **puppet theater** performances of stories from the *Ramakien* (the Thai national epic) at the Suan Lum Night Market (adjacent to Lumphini Park). With this popular night market under threat of closure, it is uncertain how long this wonderful theater group will last or where they will go. Complex puppets are manipulated by up to three masters, and their movements are chillingly lifelike; the theater has hitherto been a training facility for Thai kids. Shows have been running nightly at 8pm. Call ✆ **02252-9683** for program details, ticket prices, and the latest news on its future; or visit www.thaipuppet.com.

CINEMA

Bangkok cinemas are almost always located in malls and show a small selection of Hollywood films—with most leaning toward action films, though occasionally you may catch an art-house movie at two of the city's oldest cinemas, **Siam** and **Lido.** For general information on what's on and where, check out www.movieseer.com. A couple of **Film Festivals** are held annually; alas, poor publicity, movie-star no-shows, and haywire scheduling have been commonplace. Below are information hot lines for the city's major cinemas. The English-language newspapers also carry show times.

EGV: ✆ **02812-9999,** at Siam Discovery, Central Pinklao
Lido: ✆ **02252-6498,** at Siam Square
Major Cineplex: ✆ **02511-5819,** at Sukhumvit Soi Ekkamai, CentralWorld
SF Cinema City: ✆ **02611-6444,** at Mah Boon Krong (MBK) on Phayathai Road
SFX Cinema: ✆ **02260-9333,** at Emporium, on Sukhumvit Road
Siam: ✆ **02251-3508,** at Siam Square

THE CLUB & BAR SCENE

From cool jazz lounges in top-end hotels to streetside dives in the backpacker district, Bangkok's got somewhere for everyone to feel good after dark. Many bars feature live music, and decor ranges from Wild West Saloon to English pub to futuristic dance club. The city is famed for its go-go bars, which are clustered in Patpong, Nana Plaza, and Soi Cowboy, so this aspect of the city is easy to avoid if it offends you (see "The Sex Scene," below). For a sundowner to remember, head for one of the city's rooftop bars, such as **Sky Bar,** and take in the panoramic view of this restless metropolis.

By the Riverside

If you'd prefer to unwind with an evening cocktail and avoid the sleaze, head to two of the coolest bars in town, both at the **Dome at State Tower** ★★ (1055 Silom Rd.; ✆ **02624-9999**). The low-lit, indoor-outdoor lounge bar, **Distil,** sits on the 64th floor, just above the equally vertiginous, wholly outdoor **Sky Bar.** From both venues, the views of the city are amazing, and occasionally musicians perform at Sky Bar. The Dome instigates strict (smart) dress codes at all its venues, but it's definitely worth dressing up for.

To take in the heavy aroma of cigars mixed with the sultry sounds of jazz, the **Bamboo Bar,** at the **Oriental Hotel** (Soi Oriental, Charoen Krung [New] Rd.; ✆ **02236-0400**) is the place to go see and be seen—it's popular with visiting celebs. Just across the river and upstream is the towering silhouette of the **Millennium Hilton, Bangkok** (123 Charoennakorn Rd.; ✆ **02442-2000**), whose rooftop lounge **360°** is where night owls congregate to watch the city lights.

Silom Road & Patpong

Patpong, which covers Soi Patpong 1 and 2, between Surawong and Silom roads, gets crammed with crowds, and is prime territory for pickpockets. Though the area is known for its go-go bars and sex shows, you don't need to visit for risqué entertainment—there's a night market area to check out, too (p. 141). The go-go bars are relatively modest, but if you venture into a sex show in an upstairs bar, be prepared to pay hugely inflated prices for your drinks. Web blogs recount vivid tales of how bars with sex shows sell overpriced drinks; when punters object, bouncers have been called in to "help." It can all end very nastily.

There are a number of bars just near Patpong. **The Barbican** (9/4–5 Soi Thaniya, off Silom Rd.; ✆ **02234-3590**) is a stylish hangout with good bar food and live music. **The Irish Xchange** on Convent Road (at 1/5–6 Sivadon Building; ✆ **02266-7160**) caters to Bangkok yuppies and foreign expatriates, with Irish pub style and live music after hours.

Head to Silom Soi 4 (btw. Patpong 2 and Soi Thaniya, off Silom Rd.) to find small homegrown clubs spinning great music, as well as the city's prominent gay clubs, **Telephone Bar** (114/11–13 Silom Soi 4; ✆ **02234-3279**) and the **Balcony** (86-8 Silom Soi 4; ✆ **02235-5891**) foremost among them.

On Sathorn Nua Road, not quite as far as Surasak BTS, you'll find the supercool **Hu'u Bar** ★★ (ground floor of Ascott-serviced residences; ✆ **02676-6677**), a hip bar with amazing cocktails as well as a classy art gallery–cum-diner upstairs.

Khao San Road

Over on Rattanakosin Island, in Old Bangkok, the backpackers on Khao San Road still party on at **Gulliver's,** on the corner of Khao San and Chakrabongse roads (✆ **02629-1988**). There are quite a few small dance clubs that come and go around here. You'll find

lots of travelers in their 20s, and the atmosphere is always laid-back. In the middle of Khao San, look for **Silk Bar** (129–131 Khaosan Rd.; ✆ **02281-9981**), a dolled-up hideaway across from the Krung Thai Bank. Also don't miss **Lava** (249 Khao San Rd.; ✆ **02281-6565**), a popular basement dance club. For a more laid-back evening, head west of Khao San to **Phra Athit Road,** where there are any number of small cafes with live performances of folk, blues, and rock tunes. These small venues are full of Thai college students going "beat." Acts change nightly, so walk the road's length, and have a peek in each spot. Down the small *sois* surrounding the temple compound (on the river end of Khao San), look for lots of little open-air bars—they're a good place to meet fellow travelers. One to try is **Ban Sabai** (12 Soi Rongmai; ✆ **02629-1596**).

Sukhumvit Road

As mentioned earlier, by sunset, the *sois* off Sukhumvit Road morph into a giant red-light zone, so don't venture off the main road here unless you are ready to be hassled by touts and hookers. Sukhumvit plays host to a wide range of pub-style bars as well as a couple of Bangkok's popular clubs.

Q Bar (34 Sukhumvit Soi 11; ✆ **02252-3274**) is a great venue with cool decor and sounds, but has more than its fair share of working girls. A few meters away, **Bed Supper Club** (26 Sukhumvit Soi 11; ✆ **02651-3537**) has a space-age dance club adjoining its sci-fi-inspired restaurant. Like Q Bar, it smacks of industrial chic, with polished concrete and unisex loos. The expat DJs are fantastic, and the clientele includes music and media stars.

The Bull's Head (Sukhumvit Soi 33/1; ✆ **02261-0665**) is a fun local pub that draws crowds with frequent theme parties and a clubhouse vibe. **Roots Reggae Club** (6/7–8 Sukhumvit Soi 26; ✆ **02259-7002**) is as it sounds, a cool reggae club with occasional hip-hop and tech. **Huntsman** (at the Landmark Hotel, Sukhumvit Rd.; ✆ **02254-0404**) is a popular place for cold draft beer and big-screen sports.

Barsu, at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Sukhumvit Rd. (✆ **02649-8888**), offers soul, funk, rock, and plenty of '70s and '80s sounds.

In a little alleyway off Soi 11 (near Suk 11 Guesthouse), there's a weird makeshift outdoor bar, known as **Cheap Charlie's,** where drinks are affordable and you'll encounter a young, after-work atmosphere.

The **Conrad Bangkok** ★ (87 Witthayu/Wireless Rd.; ✆ **02690-9999**) hosts two of Bangkok's hottest spots: **87** is a contemporary bar dance club patronized by wealthy Thai yuppies, Indians, and expats, with theme nights and special events with guest DJs. Despite its name, the **Diplomat Bar** is not filled with diplomats, but young Thais or cigar-puffing corporate guests in smart suits, enjoying the regular jazz performances.

THE SEX SCENE

Since the 1960s—and particularly since the Vietnam War—Bangkok has had a reputation as the sin capital of Asia. Its hundreds of saunas, sex clubs, bars, and massage parlors act as fronts for organized prostitution, drug peddling, child-trafficking rackets, pedophile rings, and people smugglers. First-time tourists are sometimes staggered by the numbers of septuagenarian gentlemen trawling these areas looking for teenage Thais of either sex. Of course, the clientele is not just foreign; Thai men frequently engage the services of hookers.

While prostitution is technically illegal in Thailand, this law is rarely enforced, making foreigners feel it is therefore "safe" to pay for sex in Thailand. It is not. Too often, the

people working this industry are doing this because they have no choice; and some are underage, though they may purport to be older than they are. Reports about poor families selling their children into prostitution are true—many children are held in brothels against their will. Those adults seen making even the slightest sexual advances toward them, if caught, risk a heavy prison sentence and a subsequent, global media frenzy, and that happened numerous times in 2006 and 2007. The worst areas are concentrated around **Patpong** (off Silom Rd.), **Nana Plaza** (Sukhumvit Soi 4), and **Soi Cowboy** (btw. Sukhumvit Soi 21 and 23) districts.

A startling increase in HIV-positive cases in the past 20 years has encouraged the education of commercial sex workers about the use of condoms, but AIDS is still a major concern, as are other STDs. Occasional crackdowns in Patpong close some of the raunchier shows, but still, men and women in the clubs are all "for sale"—clients simply pay a "bar fine." If this is your scene, be aware of the risks and play it safe.

Note that the city's smarter hotels will all stop you if you bring a hooker into the lobby. Other hotels require guests to register night visitors, and the client will have to pay the hotel for this privilege. Also know that, every year in Bangkok, hundreds of cases are reported of prostitutes drugging their customers and robbing them in their hotel rooms. If you believe this cannot happen to you, think again. See p. 48 in "Planning Your Trip to Thailand" for more information.

8 SIDE TRIPS FROM BANGKOK

There are plenty of easy day trips from Bangkok. Favorites include various cruises along the Chao Phraya to the more distant *klongs,* and to the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, north of Bangkok, with a stop at the Bang Pa-In Summer Palace. Kids will enjoy most of these listed below.

EASY 1-DAY EXCURSIONS

The Ancient City (Muang Boran) ★★

This remarkable museum is a giant scale model of Thailand spread over hundreds of acres, with more than a hundred models of the country's major landmarks either displayed as life-size or in reduced scale. For visitors short of time, it is an excellent way to get an overview of the country's most impressive buildings in just 1 day. It has been built over the past 30 years by a local millionaire who has played out his obsession with Thai history on a grand scale. Because it is far from the heart of Bangkok, the Ancient City is best visited by organized tour, though you can certainly go on your own. It is at kilometer 33 on the old Sukhumvit Highway, in Samut Prakan Province. All travel agents offer package tours that combine this with the nearby Crocodile Farm, though you could easily spend a day just in the Ancient City. You'll also need to arrange a method of getting around, as it's too far to walk everywhere; choices are a car and driver, rented bicycle, or tram tour with guide. Muang Boran is open daily from 8am to 5pm, and admission is 300B (children 150B). Contact ✆ **02709-1644,** or visit www.ancientcity.com for info.

Samutprakarn Crocodile Farm and Zoo

Only 3km (1¾ miles) from the Ancient City, you'll find the **Samutprakarn Crocodile Farm and Zoo,** at kilometer 30 on the Old Sukhumvit Highway (✆ **02703-4891**). Supposedly the world's largest, it has more than 60,000 crocs, both fresh and saltwater.

During the hourly show (9am–5pm), handlers wrestle the crocs in murky ponds—enough to scare the living daylights out of junior. Admission is 300B. It's open daily from 7am to 6pm, and feeding takes place between 4:30 and 5:30pm.

Rose Garden Riverside

Besides its delightful rose garden, this attractive theme park and resort that sprawls over 28 hectares (69 acres) is known for its all-in-one show of Thai culture that includes Thai classical and folk dancing, Thai boxing, sword fighting, and cockfighting. It's hardly authentic, but it is a convenient way for visitors with limited time to digest some canned Thai culture. It's located 32km (20 miles) west of Bangkok, on the way to Nakhon Pathom, on Highway 4 (✆ **03432-2544;** www.rosegardenriverside.com). The resort's flagship restaurant, Inn Chan, offers an idyllic spot to take lunch and serves traditionally prepared Thai dishes. Admission to the cultural show, which starts daily at 2pm, is 480B adults, 240B for kids; you can wander around the extensive gardens for 50B. It is open daily from 8am to 6pm.

Samphran Elephant Grounds & Zoo

Located 1km (⅔ mile) north of the Rose Garden, in Samphran (30km/19 miles from the city), the **Samphran Elephant Grounds and Zoo** (✆ **02284-1873;** www.elephantshow.com) is a lush 24-hectare (59-acre) garden complex offering two entertaining elephant shows and crocodile wrestling shows daily. Admission is 500B for adults, 300B for children. The zoo is open daily from 8:30am to 5:30pm. Crocodile wrestling shows are at 12:45 and 2:20pm; elephant show times are at 1:45 and 3:30pm, with additional shows on Saturday, Sunday, and holidays at 10:30am.

Activity Parks

If the heat and the kids have gotten to you, splash out (literally) with a trip to **Siam Water Park,** in Minburi (✆ **02919-7200;** www.siamparkcity.com), a large complex of water slides, enormous swimming pools with artificial surf, waterfalls, playgrounds, and a beer garden. It's a 30-minute drive east of town (or 1 hr. by bus no. 26 or 27, from Victory Monument). Admission is 200B (children 100B), including rides. Siam Water Park is open daily from 10am to 6pm. Also on the bus no. 26 route is the nearby **Safari World & Marine Park** (✆ **0662/9144100**; www.safariworld.com/)**,** an outdoor zoo tailor-made for restless kids, with restaurants and shows.

NAKHON PATHOM CHEDI

One of Thailand's oldest towns, Nakhon Pathom is thought to be where Buddhism first established a following in this region, over 2000 years ago. Thus, it is fitting that it should be home to the **Phra Pathom Chedi** (daily 6am–6pm; admission 40B), the tallest (120m/394 ft.) and most revered stupa in the kingdom. The site has been abandoned and rebuilt many times through the centuries, and the current structure was the work of Rama IV in 1853. Apart from its sheer enormity, the *chedi* impresses with its range of Buddha images in niches, all displaying different *mudras* (hand gestures). Located 56km/35 miles west of Bangkok, the *chedi* can be visited in combination with a trip to the **Floating Market** (see below) or en route to **Kanchanaburi** (see below).

Floating Market at DamnoenSaduak ★

The **Floating Market at Damnoen Saduak,** Ratchaburi, is about 40 minutes south of Nakhon Pathom. The best known of Thailand's floating markets is very photogenic, as

the sampans on the canals are laden with colorful fruits and flowers, and the vendors dress in traditional costume, though it soon becomes clear that it's all staged for tourists. Some tours combine the Floating Market with a visit to the Rose Garden (see above for info). If you choose to go via organized tour, such as **World Travel Service** (✆ **02233-5900**), expect to pay about 1,800B for the 1-day trip combo with the Rose Garden.

SITES FARTHER AFIELD

Kanchanaburi

139km (86 miles) NW of Bangkok

Kanchanaburi lies on the **River Kwae** (*Mae Nam Kwae,* in Thai), better known to the West as the **River Kwai.** The city became famous for a single-track rail bridge, built under the Japanese occupation in WWII by Allied prisoners of war (POWs), linking Myanmar and Thailand. Due to the thousands of servicemen and women who lost their lives in this project, and in the notoriously inhumane Japanese internment camps, it became known popularly as the Death Railway. The town, and the dark times associated with it, came to fame following the hugely successful British film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (which was shot in Sri Lanka). The original wooden bridge no longer exists, so today's visitors, pilgrims, and former POWs head to a similar, but now heavily commercialized, iron bridge that was built around the same time. Every year, in the last days of November, the city hosts several evenings of light and sound shows to commemorate the bombing of the bridge in 1944. Many former Allied prisoners, as well as local Thai tourists, fill the city and hotels generally book up fast.

In addition to the bridge, lots of other worthwhile attractions are in the area, including golf courses, bike trails, caves, and waterfalls in the surrounding hills. The area's handful of nice hotels and riverside guesthouses also make this a popular escape from the heat of Bangkok.

Getting to Kanchanaburi

You can connect by railway from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **1690**) on regular weekend junkets that start in the early morning, or go by slow daily trains from **Thonburi Station** (formerly Bangkok Noi Station; ✆ **02411-3102**) to **Kanchanaburi Station** (✆ **03456-1052**); rail trips here are quite scenic and cost next to nothing (about 30B each way). They're a great experience—just be prepared for no air-conditioning for 3 long hours. There are also frequent regular buses from the **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02422-4444**).

Accommodations

It's a bit stuck in the 1980s and worn in parts, but the immense **Felix River Kwai Resort** (9/1 Moo 3, Tambon, Kanchanaburi; ✆ **03455-100023;** www.felixriverkwai.co.th) is still the best place to stay in town. Expect room rates from 3,000B upward, and know that the grounds make up for the chunky decor. Or try the **Bamboo House** (3–5 Soi Vietnam; ✆ **03462-4470**), which is basic but well located.

On Mae Nam Khwae Road, the pretty **Inchantree Resort** (✆ **03462-4914**), at number 443, and the friendly **Ploy Guesthouse,** at number 79/2 (✆ **03451-5804;** www.ploygh.com), are good midrange (more atmospheric) choices near the bridge. See **www.kanchanburi-info.com** for more tips on accommodations.

Attractions

The town's sites focus on the World War II history of the area. Start any tour of Kanchanaburi at the so-called **Bridge over the River Kwai,** emulating its more famous

predecessor, built by World War II prisoners, and the main backdrop to the suspenseful 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai,* directed by David Lean, which won seven Oscars. The bridge is about 5km (3 miles) north of the Kanchanaburi city center.

The **Allied War Cemetery** is where many of the 16,000 POWs who died building the railway are laid to rest; graves are organized by country. It is a sobering thought to realize that over 100,000 people died in the construction of this project, mostly conscripted laborers and prisoners. It's a 10-minute walk from the train station on Saengchto Road. It's open daily 8:30am to 6pm, and charges no entry fee.

Adjacent to the cemetery is the **Thailand-Burma Railway Center** (✆ **03451-0067;** www.tbrconline.com; daily 9am–5pm; adults 100B, children 50B), which displays a well-organized collection of photos and memorabilia, with ample English descriptions, maps with detailed historical background, and good audiovisual presentations recounting the terrifying fate of the Allied POWs during World War II. Nearby (just south of the cemetery along the river), find the mustier but no less moving **JEATH War Museum** (Wat Chaichumpol, Bantai, Kanchanaburi; ✆ **03451-5203;** daily 8:30am–6pm; admission 30B). JEATH is an acronym for Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand, and Holland. Here, you'll see haunting photos and artifacts in a rustic bamboo museum adjacent to Wat Chaichumpol. Most poignant are the letters and faded photos of the many GIs who've returned since the end of the war.

Some 45km (28 miles) north of Kanchanaburi, you'll find **Wat Pha Luangta Bua Yannasampanno Forest Monastery,** better known as the **Tiger Temple** (www.tigertemple.org). Featured in dozens of TV shows and magazines, this rural temple is home to various animals, including a dozen tigers, most rescued from poachers as cubs. The monks here appear to have a remarkable understanding with these man-eating beasts, as the tigers are as tame as cats and pose placidly for photo ops. However, some criticize the monks for their attention-grabbing tactics and hefty admission fees (300B), while others claim the animals are drugged. The temple is open daily from 8:30am to 5pm, but it is best to go in the afternoon, when the tigers are allowed to roam free.

Other sites farther afield from Kanchanaburi include the **Hellfire Pass,** on the route of the Death Railway, which can be visited by train, as well as the **Erawan National Park,** north of town, where you can see one of Thailand's most attractive waterfalls.

Khao Yai National Park ★

120km (75 miles) NE of Bangkok

Located 3 hours from the Big Mango, near Nakhon Ratchasima (known as Khorat), on the edge of Thailand's rural northeast, the park is home to some high peaks and therefore boasts cooler temperatures year-round. It's a good place to spot wildlife, such as lar gibbons, barking deer, hornbills, and any number of other bird species, as well as a good chance to see wild elephants congregated around roadside salt licks.

Ayutthaya & 1-Day Riverboat Trips ★★

76km (47 miles) NW of Bangkok

The temple town of Ayutthaya and the nearby Summer Palace compound of Bang Pa-In are both popular day trips from Bangkok. Ayutthaya was the capital of Thailand from 1350 until it was sacked in 1767 by the Burmese; thereafter, the capital moved briefly to Thonburi, and then to Bangkok. Ayutthaya's temples are magnificent—both Khmer and Thai-style ruins lie along the rivers here, in what was once Thailand's greatest city. It's also an excellent place to rent a bicycle (the terrain is flat) and worth an overnight, in

conjunction with an enjoyable 1-day boat trip. Nearby Bang Pa-In is home to some wonderfully whimsical mid-19th-century royal palaces, set amid splendid gardens with topiary elephants.

Most people get to Ayutthaya and Bang Pa-In by river cruise. Travel agents or hotels can arrange this for you, including the early-morning transfer from your hotel to the boat pier or coach. Usually at least one leg of the journey is undertaken by luxury coach, with a guide. It's an early rise and an all-day trip: Tour buses can leave as early as 6:30am in order to pick up tourists from a number of Bangkok hotels (which itself can take hours). Sometimes, there's an option to travel by coach both ways. Departure points are close to the River City pier, and tickets cost in the range of 2,000B per person (bus and boat) or less, if you choose to travel both ways by bus. Contact **River Sun Cruises** (✆ **02266-9125**) for more details, but check websites (such as www.thairivercruise.com) for the full range of cruise options.

For an optimum river experience (without the coach travel), the **Chao Phraya Express Co.** (✆ **02222-5330**) runs high-season tours on Sundays throughout December that go both ways by river. Tours depart Maharaj Pier at 7am (tickets 999B), returning around 7pm. They also run trips to **Ko Kret,** a small river island just north of Bangkok, famed for its terra-cotta ware, crafted by descendants of the country's Mon people. For a superluxury cruise option, the Marriott Resort & Spa operates **Manohra Cruises** (✆ **02477-0770;** www.manohracruises.com), offering a variety of day and evening cruises, including overnight trips to Ayutthaya and Bang Pa-In. These trips use fully renovated, traditional rice barges. Though they usually cost hundreds of dollars, special packages are available online or through travel agents.

For more specific information on Ayutthaya, see the first section of chapter 11, "Central Thailand."

8 The Eastern Seaboard

Tracing the coastline east of Bangkok along the Gulf of Thailand, there are three major tourist destinations, each with a distinct character. One important advantage of heading to places along the east coast is their proximity to the capital and Suvarnabhumi International Airport. The closest is **Pattaya,** one of the oldest resort developments in the country, which is working hard to shed its bad reputation as a center for sex tourism, not to mention the cagey underworld that goes with it. The town is repositioning itself as a family vacation spot, with an array of top-quality, self-contained resorts, a wide choice of restaurants, and numerous outdoor and water activities.

The main Pattaya beach is still overcoming the effects of unregulated construction, during which heavy industrial and human pollutants leaked into the bay, but there's now a sewage treatment plant nearby. The beach is a long, thin strip of coarse sand, and offshore motorboats buzz like hornets. Nearby **Jomtien,** just south of town, is quieter and more appealing but still suffers from pollution. For those who want to swim in the sea, it's best to rent a boat and go to the outlying islands, where the water is cleaner and a range of water-friendly sports is available.

Continuing east from Pattaya, **Ko Samet,** in Rayong Province, is a small island with heaps of bungalows, both basic and luxurious, and beautiful beaches. It is a low-luxe, laid-back retreat reachable by a short ferry ride from the mainland in the town of **Ban Phe** (via Rayong). Though isolated, Samet is popular with foreigners on a budget and gets very crowded on weekends when Thai yuppies from Bangkok visit.

Ko Chang, the last holiday stop before Cambodia, has grown rapidly during the past decade. It now boasts sprawling luxury resorts as well as a host of midrange and budget options. But in terms of tourist numbers and accessibility, this—Thailand's second-largest island—is still behind both Phuket and Ko Samui. By road, Ko Chang is 5 hours east of Bangkok; Bangkok Airways offers 55-minute flights from the capital to nearby Trat, making it a much more manageable trip.

1 PATTAYA

147km (91 miles) SE of Bangkok

The slow evolution of Pattaya from a sleepy fishing town to a sprawling development of high-rise coastal resorts began in 1959 when U.S. Army GIs, stationed in the northeast, came here for R & R. Word spread, and with more U.S. troops arriving to fight in the Vietnam War, the town became a hot destination for weekend partying. The impression left by those early visitors accounts for its ill repute today, propagated by hundreds of go-go clubs, beer bars, and seedy massage parlors along the beachside.

Tourism boomed in the 1980s, and unchecked resort development was exacerbated by a lack of infrastructure upgrades—so much so that beaches became flooded with raw sewage. Recent years have seen a few civil projects to clean up the bay area with some success, but environmental work is still needed to improve water quality.

Despite this, Pattaya now supports a collection of large, sophisticated international resorts. Smaller hotels set in sprawling, manicured seaside gardens and upscale restaurants dot the landscape. The town is also trying to create an image as a family destination, expat retirement magnet, and convention hub—and it now has the facilities to back this up. Pattaya's close-knit expatriate community not only is at the forefront in the effort to clean up the town's image, but also is very active in other local activities, particularly in charity-related events.

Neighboring Jomtien is a popular alternative to Pattaya. Less seedy surroundings complement the narrow beaches; however, government reports state that water quality is still under par. Jomtien's best accommodations are private condominiums, but it does have a few high-quality hotels.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

By Plane

The nearest airport is in U-Tapao, 45 minutes east of the city (✆ **03824-5595**). It is served by **Bangkok Airways,** which has flights daily to Phuket (3,900B one-way) and to Ko Samui (3,200B one-way). Trip time for both is approximately an hour. Make reservations through their offices in Bangkok (✆ **02265-5678;** www.bangkokair.com). They have an office in Pattaya at Fairtex Arcade, Building A, Room A5, 179/85–212 Moo5, N. Pattaya Rd. (✆ **03841-2382**).

To get to and from the U-Tapao airport to Pattaya, you can arrange a private transfer through your resort. A limo can be as steep as 1,500B, though. If you are arriving at Suvarnabhumi International Airport and heading to Pattaya, your only option is by bus or taxi (see below).

By Train

An inconvenient and slow (weekdays only) local train chugs away from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong station** at 6:55am; the homebound train departs Pattaya at 2:20pm. The 4-hour trip costs only 31B. Call **Hua Lamphong** in Bangkok (✆ **02621-0701** or 1690) or the train station in Pattaya (✆ **03842-9285**). The Pattaya train station is east of the resort strip, off Sukhumvit Road, and *songtaews* (communal pickup trucks) connect with all destinations on the main beach for around 40B.

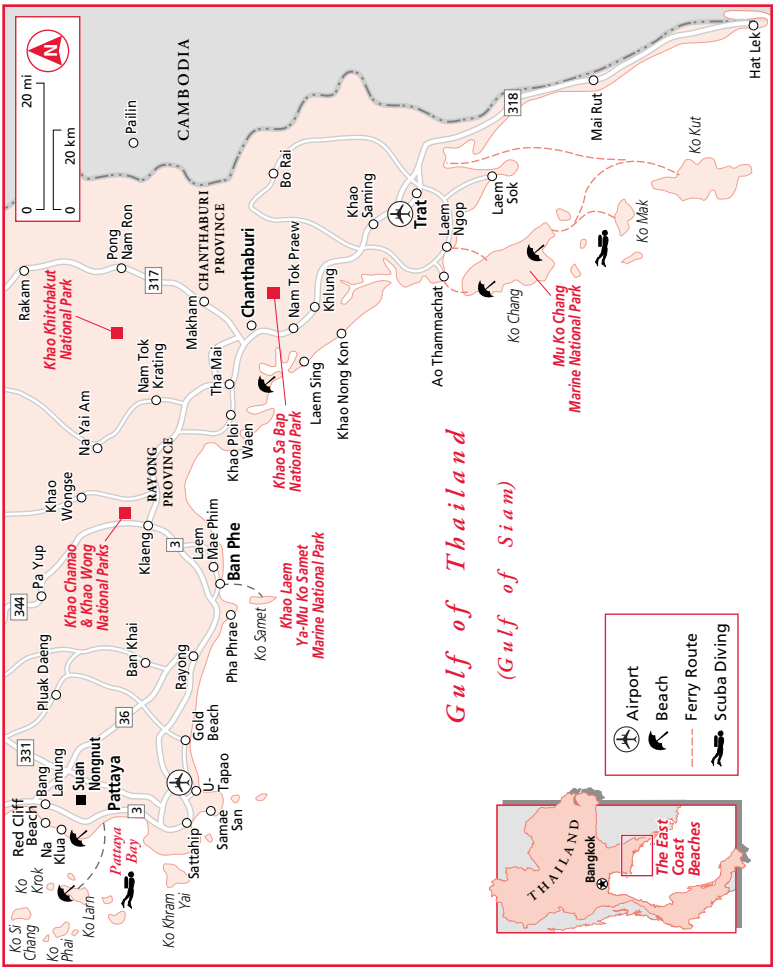
By Public Bus

The most common and practical form of transportation to Pattaya is the bus. Buses depart from **Bangkok's Eastern Bus Terminal,** on Sukhumvit Road (opposite Soi 63, at the Ekkamai BTS; ✆ **02391-2504**), every hour beginning at 5am until 11pm every day. For an air-conditioned coach, the fare is 113B. There are also regular buses from **Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal,** on Kampaengphet 2 Road (near Mo Chit; ✆ **02936-2841**)—leaving from there is a good way to avoid the Bangkok rush hour.

The bus station in town is on North Pattaya Road (✆ **03842-9877**). From there, you can catch a shared ride on a *songtaew* to your hotel for about 40B, or a bit more for a taxi.

By Private Bus

Major hotels or travel agencies in both Bangkok and Pattaya operate private shuttles, so be sure to inquire when booking. **Rung Reung Tour** (✆ **03842-9877**) has big air-conditioned buses (fare 124B), departing every 2 hours from 7am to 9pm (trip time: 2 hr.), to and from Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport.



By Taxi

Taxis from the Suvarnabhumi taxi counter go for upwards of 1,200B, and any hotel concierge in Bangkok can negotiate with a metered taxi driver to take you to or from your Pattaya resort, door to door, for about the same fare.

By Car

Take Highway 3 east from Bangkok; tolls are payable on the toll roads. See "Getting Around," below, for info on car rentals.

Visitor Information

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) office** (609 Moo 10, Pratamnak Rd.; ✆ **03842-7667**) is south of Pattaya City, up the hill on the road between Pattaya and neighboring Jomtien. Plenty of info is available in most hotel lobbies, along with free local maps and publications, such as *What's On Pattaya* and *Explore Pattaya and the East Coast. Pattaya Mail* is the local English-language paper, which costs 25B.

Orientation

Pattaya Beach Road is the heart of the town; a long strip of hotels, bars, restaurants, and shops overlook Pattaya Bay. Pattaya 2nd and Pattaya 3rd roads run parallel to Beach Road and form a busy central grid of small, crowded *sois* bound by North Pattaya and South Pattaya roads, bisected by Central Pattaya Road. At both the far northern (The Dusit Resort) and the far southern (Sheraton Pattaya Resort) ends of the strip are two bluffs. Due south is condo-lined Jomtien Beach—a 15-minute ride from Pattaya.

Getting Around

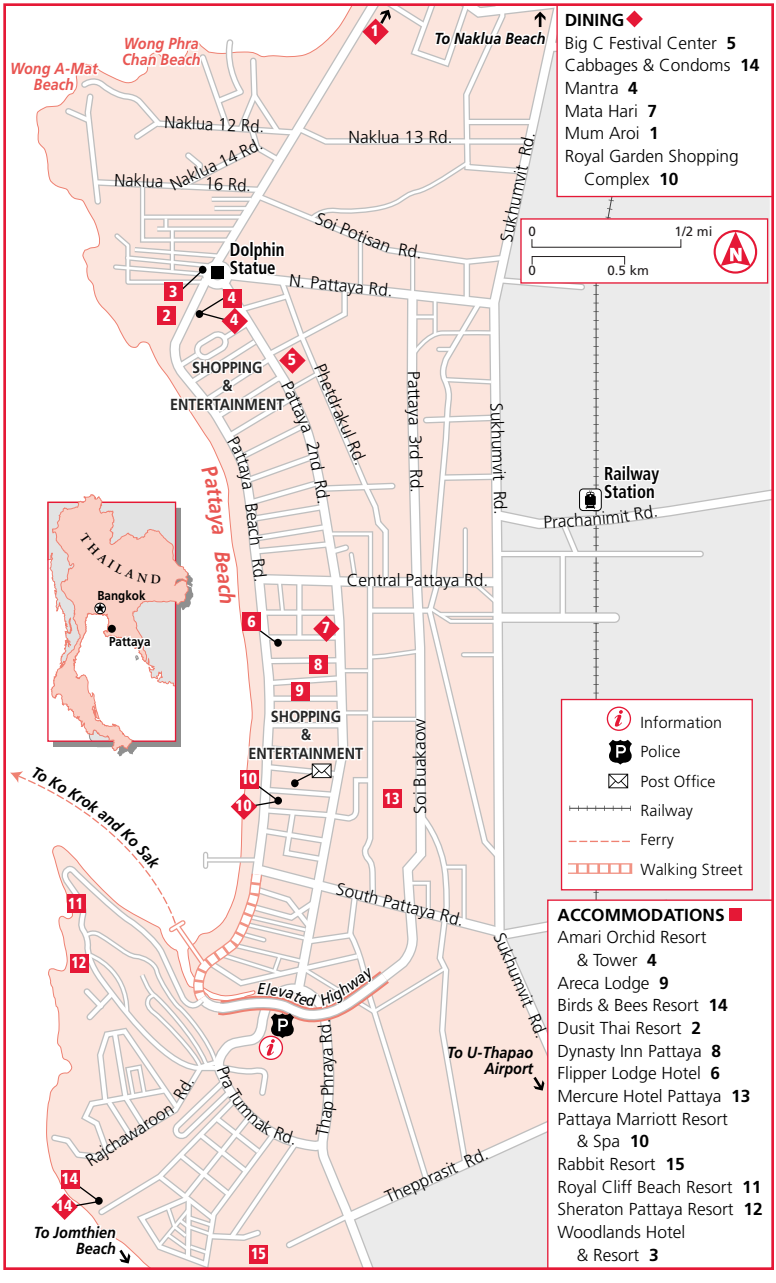
BY MINIBUS OR SONGTAEW *Songtaews* are red pickup trucks with wooden benches that follow regular routes up and down the main streets. Fares within Pattaya start at 10B, while getting to such far-flung beaches as Jomtien costs about 30B. However, agree on the fare before getting in, as drivers will charge you a taxi rate if the truck is empty. If you are on a shoestring budget, don't give in; bargain hard or wait for a full truck. Some hotels operate their own minibuses; check on this when you book.

BY CAR Car-rental agencies offering discounts in the off-season abound. Well-known car-rental companies, such as **Avis,** have counters at the **Dusit Resort** (✆ **03836-1627**); rates start at about 1,200B per day for a Suzuki Caribbean, to 1,700B upward for a compact sedan. **Budget Car Rental**'s office, at Beach Road (✆ **03871-0717**), offers comparable rates. There are plenty of local agencies, but beware of the poor condition of the older-model jeeps; read the contract and check the vehicles before renting. One such agency is **Chalee Car Rental,** 312/13–14, Moo 9, Pattaya 3rd Rd. (✆ **03872-0413;** www.pattayacarrental.com), with cars from 1,200B per day (minimum 3 days).

BY MOTORCYCLE Let's be honest. Pattaya is a party town and its busy roads are full of drunk and reckless drivers. But the brave (or foolish) can rent 100cc motorcycles for around 200B a day, or less for a longer period. You just need your passport as collateral—nobody asks to see a license—but insurance is not included, so a big risk is involved, as accidents are so common. Big choppers and Japanese speed bikes (500cc) start at around 1,000B per day. Helmets are mandatory by law—so wear one, even if the locals don't.

Fast Facts

There are many independent **money-changing booths,** 24-hour bank exchanges (with better rates), and ATMs at every turn in town. The **post office** is on Soi Post Office, near the **Royal Garden Plaza** (✆ **03842-9341**). **Bangkok Pattaya Hospital** (✆ **03825-9999**) has full services and English-speaking staff. In Pattaya, the numbers for the **Tourist Police** are ✆ **03842-9371** or 1155. Internet services are easy to find. Rates are about 30B to 60B per hour. There are a number of **Internet cafes** along the waterfront (try Soi Yamato).


DINING
Big C Festival Center 5
Cabbages & Condoms 14
Mantra 4
Mata Hari 7
Mum Aroi 1
Royal Garden Shopping Complex 10
0 1/2 mi
0 0.5 km
N
Wong Phra Chan Beach
Wong A-Mat Beach
To Naklua Beach
Naklua 12 Rd.
Naklua 13 Rd.
Naklua 14 Rd.
Naklua 16 Rd.
Soi Potisan Rd.
Sukhumvit Rd.
Dolphin Statue
N. Pattaya Rd.
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT
Pattaya 2nd Rd.
Phetdrakul Rd.
Pattaya 3rd Rd.
Pattaya Beach Rd.
Pattaya Beach
Railway Station
Prachanimit Rd.
Central Pattaya Rd.
THAILAND
Bangkok
Pattaya
SHOPPING & ENTERTAINMENT
Soi Buakaow
To Ko Krok and Ko Sak
South Pattaya Rd.
Elevated Highway
To U-Thapao Airport
Pra Tumnak Rd.
Rajchawaroon Rd.
Thap Phraya Rd.
Thepprasit Rd.
To Jomthien Beach
Information
Police
Post Office
Railway
Ferry
Walking Street
ACCOMMODATIONS
Amari Orchid Resort & Tower 4
Areca Lodge 9
Birds & Bees Resort 14
Dusit Thai Resort 2
Dynasty Inn Pattaya 8
Flipper Lodge Hotel 6
Mercure Hotel Pattaya 13
Pattaya Marriott Resort & Spa 10
Rabbit Resort 15
Royal Cliff Beach Resort 11
Sheraton Pattaya Resort 12
Woodlands Hotel & Resort 3

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Wat Khao Phra Yai is a small temple complex high above town to the south (go by *songtaew* toward Jomtien, and then hop off and climb the steep hill). The temple has excellent vistas and a 10m (33-ft.) gold Buddha serenely surveying the western sea.

Alangkarn is a high-tech entertainment complex centered on the uniqueness of being decidedly "Thai" and features the Thai Extravaganza Show with laser and lighting effects. The shows include scenes from famous historical events such as an elephant battle, as well as Thai dancing. It also has a Thai restaurant, which serves dinner at 5pm before the show, and a shopping area containing local products. Alangkarn (✆ **03825-6000;** www.alangkarnthailand.com) is 10km (6¼ miles) from Pattaya at kilometer 155 on the Sukhumvit Highway. The entrance fee is 1,000B for adults, 700B for children, for the show only, or 1,200B for adults, 840B for kids, including dinner. It's open daily from 5 to 11pm (show time is 6–7pm).

For something a bit hokier, **Ripley's Believe It or Not,** third floor, Royal Garden Plaza, 218 Beach Rd. (✆ **03871-0294**), is open daily 11am to 11pm (admission 480B). It's full of unusual exhibits and odd facts from around the globe. Just next door is the Ripley's Motion Master simulation ride. Admission to both places is 880B (adults), 780B (children). Both are great fun for kids of all ages.

The Pattaya Elephant Village (✆ **03824-9818;** www.elephant-village-pattaya.com) is a not-for-profit sanctuary dedicated to saving former working elephants. To help with funding, the village offers elephant treks and a 90-minute daily show, starting at 2:30pm, on elephant-training techniques. The treks range in price from 1,000B for a 1-hour ride to 2,000B for a full-day excursion, which also includes a guided walk in the forest and a 30-minute raft trip, while the show only costs 650B. The village is 7km (4⅓ miles) off Sukhumvit Road: Turn east at kilometer 144.5, follow the signs to Siam Country Club, and then turn right at the intersection and continue another 4km (2½ miles).

Another option outside Pattaya is **Nong Nooch Tropical Garden** (✆ **03870-9358;** www.nongnoochtropicalgarden.com), a 202-hectare (500-acre) botanical garden and elephant park 18km (11 miles) outside town, with shows that feature elephants performing alongside dancers, musicians, and other acts. Cultural performances, music, Thai boxing, audience participation, and dozens of amusing photo ops make this a fun albeit touristy activity. Lovers of tropical gardens should allow plenty of time to look at the immaculate grounds. Book directly and take advantage of a shuttle from Pattaya at either 8:30am or 1:15pm. The shows run four times a day (9:45am, 10:45am, 3pm, and 4pm daily). Tickets for the garden and show cost 400B for adults and 200B for children.

WHERE TO STAY

Busy central Pattaya features a range of accommodations, from downright seedy hotels to international upmarket resorts. Among the maze of bars, tailor shops, and eateries are some semi-isolated getaways. During the high season, reservations are recommended at least 2 weeks in advance, especially December through January.

Expensive

Amari Orchid Resort & Tower ★★★ Kids On the northern end of busy Pattaya, just out of the fray but close enough to walk there, the Amari has good amenities and a helpful staff, with rooms in both the Garden Wing and the new Ocean Tower. The open-air lobby of the Garden Wing is inviting, and guest rooms are large, trimmed in dark wood, with parquet floors and pleasing, contemporary lines. Rooms in the Ocean Tower

are even more luxurious, with open-plan bathrooms, ultramodern fixtures and fittings, and superb views of the bay. There's also a playground and lots of space in the grassy central area—which makes this a great choice for families. Amari also has good in-house dining (see Mantra under "Where to Dine," below).

Pattaya Beach, Pattaya 20150 (on the northernmost end of the beachfront road). ✆ **03841-8418.** Fax 03841-8410. www.amari.com/orchid. 525 units. 5,800B–7,500B double; from 14,500B suite. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 5 bars; babysitting; kids' club and playground; fitness center; Jacuzzi; two outdoor pools; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Dusit Thani Resort ★★ This sprawling, manicured resort straddles the bluff on the north end of the main beach and is chock-full of top-notch amenities: two lovely pools, access to two small but well-kept sandy beach coves for watersports, several dining outlets, and a small shopping arcade. Most of the balcony rooms overlook Pattaya Bay, but the gardenview rooms offer the best value. Tasteful, modern rooms are trimmed with stained wood, and each has fine furnishings and marble bathrooms. Larger rooms and suites have outdoor showers on breezy balconies. For those seeking extra amenities, the resort offers special Dusit Club and Dusit Grand rooms, a spa, and a fitness center. Overall, the accommodations are comfortable, with an old-world feel.

240/2 Pattaya Beach Rd., Pattaya 20150, Chonburi (north end of Pattaya Beach). ✆ **03842-5611.** Fax 03842-8239. www.dusit.com. 457 units. 4,050B–5,760B double; from 7,470B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby bar w/live music; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 pools; room service; spa; 3 outdoor tennis courts; watersports. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Pattaya Marriott Resort & Spa ★★ Kids For those wanting to be right in the thick of it, the Marriott is the place to be. In the center of Pattaya, adjacent to the Royal Garden Plaza shopping complex, this five-star resort is abuzz with activity for adults and kids. Rooms have wooden floors and spacious balconies with views of gardens or the sea. Bonuses are the resort's beautiful pool area in the well-kept, spacious garden, large fitness center, and highly regarded spa. The resort contains three restaurants and two bars, including the Elephant Bar, a popular meeting place overlooking the pool.

218 Beach Rd., Pattaya 20150, Chonburi. ✆ **03841-2120.** Fax 03842-9926. www.marriott.com. 289 units. 5,250B–7,500B double; 10,800B–28,800B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; pool; room service; spa; 2 lit tennis courts; watersports; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Rabbit Resort ★★ Finds The Rabbit Resort may be hard to find, but it's worth the search. This boutique hotel on Dongtan Beach, in Jomtien, lies just south of Pattaya and is an ideal place for those needing a quiet retreat and escape from name-brand luxury resorts. Set on 1.6 hectares (4 acres) of oceanfront land, it has superb gardens graced by two pools. The rooms are mostly two-story Thai-style villas, decorated with antiques personally selected by the owners. The friendly Thai staff members are always willing to please, and the proprietors are on hand to attend to special needs. The hotel serves complementary buffet breakfasts and has a grill house overlooking the sea.

318/84 Moo 12, Soi Dongtan Police Station, Jomtien 20260. ✆ **03830-3303.** Fax 03825-1628. www.rabbitresort.com. 49 units. From 6,000B double; 12,500B 2-bedroom villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; babysitting services; high-speed Internet; 2 pools. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, microwave, minibar.

Royal Cliff Beach Resort ★★★ Comprising the Royal Cliff Grand & Spa, the Royal Wing & Spa, the Royal Cliff Beach Hotel, and the Royal Cliff Terrace, this luxurious compound provides a variety of accommodations and the best range of facilities in

Pattaya. High-end **Royal Cliff Grand** and all-suite **Royal Wing** are the best choices, catering to the well-heeled business traveler. Everything is luxe, from the columned public spaces, chandeliers, and fountains to the large and opulent guest rooms. The Grand's spacious rooms are set in a contemporary, scallop-shaped tower and have marble bathrooms with separate shower stalls. The **Royal Cliff Beach Hotel,** the most affordable choice, is Pattaya's top family resort. Rooms here are also spacious, with bleached wood and pastel decor and large terraces, most with bay views. Two-bedroom suites are perfect for families. The beachfront **Royal Cliff Terrace** was the resort's first property and is the most secluded. Rooms boast contemporary decor as well as ocean views.

353 Phra Tamnak Rd., Pattaya 20150 (on cliff, south end of Pattaya Bay). ✆ **03825-0421.** Fax 03825-0511. www.royalcliff.com. 1,072 units. 7,200B–8,400B deluxe double; from 15,500B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** All Royal Cliff Beach Resort properties share all facilities, including 10 restaurants; 5 bars (many w/ live music); babysitting; children's playground; concierge; golf course; fully equipped fitness center; Jacuzzi; 5 outdoor landscaped pools; room service; 2 spas; 2 squash courts; 7 outdoor tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Sheraton Pattaya Resort ★★ Perched in the hills south of Pattaya's main beach, the Sheraton is an excellent choice for a quiet and luxurious getaway. The guest rooms and pavilions descend the hillside, flanking a maze of gardens, waterfalls, and freeform swimming pools. Decorated in pleasing pastel peaches and sea greens, the guest quarters are spacious and contain oversize king or queen beds. There's an attractive man-made white-sand beach by the water. While the rocky waterfront isn't the most inviting place for a dip, the adventurous will find the water much cleaner than that of Pattaya's main beach.

437 Phra Tamnak Rd., Pattaya 20150 (on cliff, south end of Pattaya Bay). ✆ **03825-9888.** Fax 03825-9899. www.sheraton.com/pattaya. 156 units. 9,800B–13,500B double; from 60,000B villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; babysitting; fitness center; 3 outdoor pools; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/DVD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Birds & Bees Resort ★★ This fun, inviting resort was originally known as Cabbages & Condoms. It was built by Senator Meechai Viravaidya, a Thai activist in the field of sex education and rural development projects throughout Thailand. Rooms have a rustic feel, but all the required amenities are there. Its attraction mainly lies in its two pools, a semiprivate beach, and its tucked-away location in a quiet part of Pattaya. The property is very family friendly and contains wishing wells, as well as an herb garden (with special exercise bikes designed to irrigate them). It is also home to the acclaimed Cabbages & Condoms Restaurant (see below), which has a branch in Bangkok (p. 116).

366/11 Moo 12, Phra Tamnak 4 Rd., Nongprue, Banglamung, Chonburi 20150 (south of town, on Hu Gwang Bay). ✆ **03825-0056.** Fax 03825-0034. www.cabbagesandcondoms.co.th. 50 units. 2,500B–6,000B double; 6,000B–11,000B 1- and 2-bedroom suites. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Mercure Hotel Pattaya A friendly, well-run hotel, the Mercure is only a few minutes' walking distance from the city's best shopping and the beach. The rooms are businesslike in style, not so huge, but with bright contemporary artwork mixed with Thai touches and gorgeous, slick bathrooms. The trio of swimming pools that fill the gardens—including a large free-form pool—is among the best features of a stay here. Family friendly amenities include TV video games—great if the weather turns wet!

484 Moo 10, Pattaya 2nd Rd., Soi 15, Pattaya 20150. ✆ **03842-5050.** Fax 03842-5080. www.mercure.com. 245 units. $88–$100 double. AE, MC, V. Private indoor parking included in rates. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, video games.

Woodlands Hotel & Resort (Kids) (Value) This four-star hotel in Naklua, the quieter northern area of Pattaya, offers great seasonal deals, which tend to attract families, repeat visitors, and long-term guests, mainly from Europe. The rooms, though not luxurious, are very comfortable, with views overlooking the pools and lush, tropical gardens. It also has good spa facilities, a well-equipped fitness center, and Thai cooking classes to keep everyone busy.

164/1 Moo 5, Pattaya-Naklua Rd., Pattaya 20150. ✆ **03842-1707.** Fax 03842-5663. www.woodland-resort.com. 135 units. 3,200B–8,400B double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; fitness center; 2 pools; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Inexpensive

Budget lodgings in Pattaya attract a rough clientele and can be pretty unpleasant, but you're sure to find cheap deals starting as low as 500B. Many have counters for the mandatory registration of "new friends," meaning night visitors. Some of the more reputable establishments include the **Areca Lodge** (✆ **03841-0123;** www.arecalodge.com), on Soi Diana, not far from the beach and shops, with rooms starting at 1,500B. **Dynasty Inn Pattaya,** 596/16 Soi 13, Pattaya Beach Rd. (✆ **03841-5941;** www.dynastyinn.com), is centrally located and rooms start at 1,480B. **Flipper Lodge Hotel** (✆ **03842-6401;** www.flippergroup.com), at 520/1 Soi 8, Pattaya Beach Road, is in the thick of it, so it can get a bit noisy. Nevertheless, it's a good value for the money. Rooms start at 1,300B.

WHERE TO DINE

Pattaya is teeming with small storefront bars and eateries. You'll find the big fast-food chains well represented (mercifully for some, they include **Starbucks**) along the beachfront road, and **Subway Sandwich** at the **Royal Garden Shopping Complex** (south of town). The **Big C Festival Center** (on Pattaya 2 Rd., north end of town) supports a number of other familiar restaurants. But there are excellent high-end diners too. Local dining is best at open-air joints down any *soi.* Various types of cuisine are available here and the prices range immensely. You'll get good value meals at some of the fresh seafood establishments found in the beachfront areas, but check prices before you order.

Expensive

Mantra Restaurant and Bar ★★ INTERNATIONAL Offering a unique hotel dining experience, in the pleasant surrounds of the Amari (p. 156), the Mantra has a menu that's based on eight types of cuisines (including Japanese, Indian, Chinese, and Mediterranean), and it has quickly established itself as the trendiest place in town. Everything is prepared in an open-air kitchen, enabling the guests to sample exotic food combinations in a modern setting. The sleek glass building is decorated with artifacts from all over Asia. Seating 80 over two levels, the restaurant has an extensive walk-in wine cellar. The dress code is "chic, smart, and stylish," so that means no shorts, tank tops, or sandals.

Amari Orchid Resort & Tower, Beach Rd. ✆ **0384-29591.** www.mantra-pattaya.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 220B–4,200B. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 5pm–1am and Sun 11am–3pm.

Mata Hari Restaurant ★★ CONTINENTAL This highly acclaimed, dinner-only restaurant specializes in fine European cuisine. The atmosphere is casual but elegant. The innovative menu is a favorite among the expatriate community. The convivial bar area, for presupper drinks, and the extensive wine list are big bonuses. It's often very busy (even in the low season), so reservations are recommended.

216/3 Pattaya 2nd Rd. ✆ **03842-0939.** www.pattayacity.com/matahari. Reservations recommended. Main courses 700B and up. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun 4–11:30pm.

Moderate

Mum Aroi ★ SEAFOOD This upmarket seafood restaurant is popular among resident Thais and Thai visitors. In addition to premium-quality seafood, it is known for its laid-back beach ambience. Live music adds to the atmosphere. The restaurant is just 5 minutes from Pattaya, close to the luxurious Ananya, a block of condo flats.

Beachfront Condominium, 83/4 Moo 2 Naklua Banglamung. ✆ **03823-4352.** Main courses 200B and up. No credit cards. Daily 5–11pm.

Inexpensive

Cabbages & Condoms Restaurant THAI South of town on Hu Gwang Bay, in the Birds & Bees Resort (see above), this is Pattaya's version of the much-lauded restaurant in Bangkok. Both are known not only for their food, but also their efforts to educate Thais about HIV/AIDS. The mainly Thai cuisine is good, though, with wide choices ranging from seafood to regional specialties. (Tastes are only slightly adjusted for the foreign palate.) The open-concept restaurant is set in the resort's tropical gardens and offers delightful views of the sea.

Birds & Bees Resort, 366/11 Moo 12, Phra Tamnak 4 Rd., Nongprue, Banglamung, Chonburi. ✆ **03825-0056.** www.cabbagesandcondoms.co.th. Main courses 80B–250B. MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN PATTAYA

Golf

The hills around Pattaya are known for their great courses, with many international-class greens in a short 40km (25-mile) radius of the city. Caddy fees are reasonable, around 250B, and golf carts are usually compulsory but rationally priced. Among the recommended are:

- **Burapha Golf Club,** 281 Moo 4, Tambon Bung, Sri Racha (✆ **03837-2700**), is the home of numerous tournaments. Greens fees are 2,000B on weekdays and 2,500B on weekends; it's 500B for a two-person golf cart.
- **Laem Chabang International Country Club,** 106/8 Moo 4, Tambon Bung, Sri Racha (✆ **03837-2273,** dial 0), has three 18-hole courses (A, B, and C) designed by Jack Nicklaus and very dramatic scenery. Greens fees are 2,500B on weekdays, 3,000B on weekends.
- **Siam Country Club,** 50/6 Moo 9, Tambol Pong, Banglamung (✆ **03890-9600;** fax 03890-9699), is a short hop from Pattaya and is said to be one of the country's most challenging courses. Greens fees are 2,500B on weekdays and 3,000B on weekends.

Watersports

For those who come to Pattaya to do more than party, there is plenty on offer, particularly when it comes to watersports. Pattaya's less than pristine beaches are a good excuse to head to outlying areas, where the conditions are more inviting. Day trips to such nearby islands as **Ko Khrok, Ko Lan,** and **Ko Sok** start at 1,000B per head on a full boat

(more for a private charter). To go to far-out Bamboo Island, it will cost you a bit more—about 2,800B. **Paragliding** around the bay behind a motorboat is a popular beachfront activity, and a 5-minute flight costs from 800B.

Jomtien Beach hosts **windsurfing** and **sea kayaking;** boards and boats are rented along the beach for 800B per hour.

Pattaya is a good place to learn to **scuba dive.** It has a number of reputable dive companies with PADI- and NAUI-certified instructors. The underwater visibility is consistently good, so the sport can be done year-round. There are a few dive sites near the islands, just offshore in **Pattaya Bay,** as well as **Ko Si Chang** to the north—once famous as the summer playground of foreign ambassadors to Siam during the 19th century—and **Sattahip** to the south, with diving to a depth of 40m (131 ft.). **Adventure Divers,** 391/77–78 Moo 10, Tappraya Rd. (✆ **03836-4453;** www.pattayadivers.com), is one of many PADI-certified companies offering daily trips and courses for all levels.

PATTAYA AFTER DARK

Central Pattaya is predominately a sea of flashing neon and blaring music, even in the smaller *sois.* **Walking Street** becomes a pedestrian zone in the evening in South Pattaya, on Beach Roach. Here you will see debauchery at its fullest, with an array of go-go bars, open-air drinking establishments, Thai boxing venues (before you place a bet, the fights are all fixed), and, of course, overpriced tourist restaurants. Regular bars and places with live music can also be found. The energy on the street, whether good or bad, is riotous by evening. In daylight, the passageway is bleak, with bleary-eyed revelers stumbling through seedy storefronts.

Sex for money in Pattaya is an unashamedly direct business. Dubious massage parlors are numerous in northern Pattaya. Hotels insist "visitors" (a euphemism for prostitutes) register their ID with security guards, whereupon the client pays a "joiner fee." Despite its prevalence, prostitution in Thailand is illegal, so be prepared to risk a police raid, or hefty bribe to the local police or mafia, not to mention a call to your embassy. It's *not* all innocent fun. Stories of laced drinks and aggravated theft (or worse) abound. AIDS and STDs are major concerns. To prove they are cracking down, authorities are particularly happy to splash photos of any foreigners caught with young girls or boys across the international media. (See "Sex for Sale," in chapter 3, for more info.)

Happily, Pattaya is not entirely sleazy these days, as indicated by some of its finer eateries and upscale resorts. There are a number of bars where you can go to enjoy a drink and maybe listen to live music without being propositioned. Topping the list is the **Hopf Brew House** ★★★ (219 Beach Rd.; ✆ **03871-0650**). Designed like a German brewery, this spacious watering hole brews its own beer and serves Northern European bar food. It also has an in-house band that plays mostly easy-listening tunes. **Shenanigan's** is a fun Irish-bar hangout at the Royal Garden Complex (near the Marriott; ✆ **03871-0641**), with the front entrance on Pattaya 2nd Road. It's a good place to watch major sporting events on the big screen. Then there's **Henry J. Bean's Bar and Grill** (on the beach near the Amari Orchid Resort & Tower; ✆ **03842-8161**), which is a friendly bar with live music nightly, except Sunday. It serves Tex-Mex food, complete with margaritas and a wide assortment of beers.

The town's camped-up cabaret shows are always good, lighthearted fun. Pattaya's sensational *katoeys* (transsexuals) love to don sequined gowns and feather boas and strut their stuff to packed houses nightly. Both **Tiffany's** (464 Moo 9, 2nd Rd.; ✆ **03842-1700**) and **Alcazar** (78/14 Pattaya 2nd Rd., opposite Soi 5; ✆ **03841-0224**) have hilarious shows, much like those in other tourist towns in Thailand.

2 BAN PHE & KO SAMET ★

Ko Samet: 220km (137 miles) SE of Bangkok. Ban Phe: 25km (16 miles) southeast of Rayong City

Tiny Ko Samet, better known simply as Samet (or Samed), is well known to Thais through an epic poem by Sunthorn Phu, a venerated 18th-century author and Rayong native who set his famous work, *Phra Aphimani,* on Samet. Just 1km (⅔ mile) wide, the island is a long, triangular pennant shape, split by a rocky ridge, with some gorgeous beaches on the east coast. It's deemed a national park, hence there's a 400B per-adult landing fee (children pay half that price). As with so many of Thailand's "protected" areas, though, developers have devoured so much of the long sandy coastline here that one has to wonder what is being protected with the admission fee.

Ferries from Ban Phe land at Na Dan, the island's main port on the northern coast, from where shared *songtaews* run passengers to the various beaches—Had Sai Kaew (Diamond Beach), a popular stretch with a serious party vibe, Ao Wong Deuan, or the more isolated Ao Tubtim (*Had* means "beach," and *Ao* means "bay"). Rates are posted by the ferry landing. Ao Phai's beaches just south of Had Sai Kaew can be treacherous for swimmers, so take care; in contrast, Ao Thian is popular with divers. Right down south is the chilled-out bay of Ao Kiu Na Nok. There are also a few upmarket resorts on the west side of the island at Ao Prao where speedboats run guests over to Ban Phe. Some ferries also run directly to Ao Wong Deuan, in the middle of the east coast.

Accommodations here get overpriced on weekends and in high season, and bookings may not always be honored. Stay cool and shop around. If you need to kick back and chill, avoid the busy weekend rush, when big groups of young Thai weekenders come over for some serious karaoke and drinking sessions. Peak season is similar to Pattaya's, with July through October bringing fewer travelers and lower rates.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY BUS Buses leave Bangkok every 30 minutes between 4am and 10pm for the 2½-hour journey, departing from **Ekkamai,** Bangkok's Eastern Bus Terminal, on Sukhumvit Road, opposite Soi 63 (✆ **02391-2504**). The one-way trip to Ban Phe costs 163B. From Pattaya, either flag down a passing public bus from the corner of Sukhumvit and North Pattaya roads, or book a minibus at any agency. **Malibu-Garden Resort,** on Samet, owns **Samet Island Tour,** in Pattaya (✆ **03871-0676;** www.malibu-samet.com), from which they run regular minibus transfers (250B one-way, 460B round-trip, or 600B round-trip including boat). Private cars can also be arranged. From Khao San, travel agencies offer minibus seats to Ban Phe for around 250B.

BY CAR Take the Suvarnabhumi Airport tollway from Bangkok east to Pattaya, then Highway 36 to Rayong, and then the coastal Highway 3145 to Seree Ban Phe (for about 3 hr.). See p. 82, in chapter 5, "Introducing Bangkok," for info on car rentals.

Getting to Ko Samet

BY FERRY From the Saphan Nuan Tip ferry pier at Ban Phe, ferries leave for Na Dan every half-hour (trip time: 40 min.; 50B one-way) or when full. Scheduled ferries also run at 9:30am, 1:30pm, and 5pm to Ao Wong Duean. Rates are one-way for 70B or 110B for a round-trip.

Speedboats to Ao Prao Resort can be booked at their dockside office in Ban Phe; prices vary. If you fancy whizzing over to Na Dan, it'll cost around 1,200B.

Fast Facts

Ko Samet has a few ATMs. The easiest to find is at the 7-Eleven at the Na Dan pier. The **post office** is at the Naga Bungalows (✆/fax **03864-4035**), south of Had Sai Kaew; and there's a satellite phone for overseas calls at the visitor center in the National Parks office. There are plenty of Internet places, great nightlife, and seafood eateries by the beach. A clinic is just south of the Na Dan pier before Had Sai Kaew. (Though the island is no longer supposed to be malarial, it's plagued with mosquitoes; take plenty of repellent and an antihistamine-based cream to treat bites.)

Getting Around

Island transport is limited to shared pickups or rented motorbikes, but many people simply choose to walk—it takes about 3 hours to walk the length of the entire east coast, which has most of the island's beaches. Motorbike rental prices are very high compared to the rest of the country (about 100B per hour, 300B per day), and staff at your resort can help arrange this. However, the roads are in poor condition, so drive carefully.

WHERE TO STAY

It's always risky if you haven't booked a hotel ahead, especially on busy weekends, and it's worth arranging at least the first night to avoid the throng of touts who hover at the Ban Phe Pier hungry for commission. With few exceptions, budget accommodations are very basic here. There are now some gorgeous luxury resorts and midrange bungalows, though. Samed Resorts (www.samedresorts.com) represents six of the best.

Very Expensive

Paradee ★★ Samet's most exclusive address is this fabulous villa-only resort, right on the island's southernmost tip and straddling two beaches (east and west coast). Elegant Thai decor accompanies perks such as tranquil private pools, Jacuzzis, and personal DVD players. It's perfect for couples (in fact, families are actively discouraged from staying here). At this exclusive sanctuary for the chosen few, you even get a butler with each sumptuous villa just to ensure that your every need is met.

76 Moo 4, Tambon Phe, Rayong 21160. ✆ **03864-4288,** or 02438-9771 Bangkok office. Fax 03864-4290. www.samedresorts.com. 40 units. 13,600B garden villa; 16,700B garden pool villa; 73,600B suite villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; individual pools in private villas; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Expensive

Ao Prao Resort ★★ One of the oldest upscale properties in the area, Ao Prao, located on the west-coast beach of the same name, is still one of the best. The pretty bungalows here make for quaint little holiday retreats. Rooms have delightful teak furnishings and decor, as well as four-poster beds, and some come with enormous double tubs overlooking the blissful scenery. There are plenty of watersports available and large meeting facilities, all set within a sprawling tropical garden.

60 Moo 4, Tambon Phe, Rayong 21160. ✆ **03864-4100.** Fax 0386-4099. www.samedresorts.com. 52 units. 8,800B superior; 21,200B 2-bed family suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; babysitting; outdoor pool; room service; watersports rentals; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Le Vimarn Cottages & Spa ★★★ Ao Prao's upmarket status is confirmed by this small, hillside hideaway for wannabe jet-setters; accommodation comes in three types: deluxe cottages, spa villas, and one spa villa suite. All of the huge thatched villas come with four-poster beds and lovely balconies overlooking the beach and ocean, while the resort's pool villas have Jacuzzis sharing the same wondrous sea views.

40/11 Moo 4, Tambon Phe, Rayong 21160. ✆ **03864-4104,** or 02438-9771 Bangkok office. Fax 03864-4109. www.samedresorts.com. 31 units. 8,900B deluxe cottage; 12,000B spa villa; 30,000B spa villa suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Samed Club It's fun, it's young, and it's affordable. The Samed Club offers midrange luxury rooms and amenities; you get most of the frills of expensive resorts, but for far less. The decor is modern, walls are painted with bright colors, there are walk-in tiled showers, and rooms overlook the central pool, around which sun lovers can chill out under a parasol. The more active have a wide choice of beach sports, sailing, and windsurfing activities on hand. One of the highlights is the great location at Noi Na Beach, a quiet spot on the northern coast but close enough to enjoy a good night out on Had Sai Kaew.

25 Moo 4, Tambon Phe, Rayong 21160. ✆ **03864-4341.** Fax 03864-4064. 30 units. 5,200B–7,250B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

There are plenty of midrange options scattered along the east coast, most of them equipped with a good range of facilities. One is the **Samed Grand View** (✆ **03864-4220**), which has well-spaced bungalows on busy Had Sai Kaew. Nearby, at Ao Phai, you'll find **Samed Villa's** (✆ **03864-4094;** www.samedvilla.com) bungalows, set in pretty gardens and with swish interiors. **Mooban Talay** (✆ **03864-4251;** www.mooban talay.com) offers an upscale feel to its 24 rustic bungalows on Noi Na Bay. Quiet **Samet Ville Resort** (✆ **03865-1681;** www.sametvilleresort.com), on Ao Wai, toward the southern end of the east coast, is a romantic midrange option away from the noise, and popular with Bangkok yuppies and expats.

Inexpensive

For cozy huts at good prices (and some great food in Jep's diner next door), head past heady Had Sai Khaew to Ao Hin Khok, where cool dudes hang at **Jep's Bungalows** (✆ **03864-4112**); rooms with a fan start at 600B. Farther south, on the east coast at Ao Phai, the aptly named **Lost Resort** (✆ **081810-3793**; www.thelostresort.net) has just 10 rooms and is the place for a bit of peace and quiet. Farther south still on Ao Tubtim, one of the island's longest-running resorts is **Tub Tim Resort** (✆ **03864-4025;** www.tubtimresort.com). It has a variety of smart rooms on a protected bay that is good for swimming. At all of these places, you can get a full meal for under 300B.

WHERE TO DINE

The standard fish and rice dishes available at the island's resorts will keep you sated, but it'd be a shame to miss out on some of the upscale dining, as well as great local seafood restaurants, that are available around the island. Most bungalows on Samet have their own dining areas for inexpensive, fresh seafood (don't miss the locally caught squid and

cuttlefish, which are barbecued on skewers). Every day around sunset on **Ao Hin Khok** and **Ao Phai beaches,** tables are set up under twinkling lights for big seafood barbecues brimming with the day's catch.

The somewhat oddly named (yes, it's after the TV show) **Baywatch Bar** (✆ **08182-67834** mobile), on Ao Wong Deuan, does great kebabs and Thai dishes, as well as reasonable Western fare. On Ao Phai, just south of Had Sai Khaew, **Naga Bar** (✆ **03864-4035**) is a popular hangout and serves a fine menu of local eats and tasty baked items. If you fancy drinks by the bucket and dancing after dinner, head for the **Silver Sand Resort** (✆ **03864-4301**), which is also on Ao Phai. Indeed, many restaurants on the island can turn into all-night party affairs depending on the crowd—and the amounts of alcohol consumed.

3 CHANTHABURI PROVINCE

250km (155 miles) E of Bangkok

Travelers heading east to rugged Ko Chang (see "Trat & Ko Chang," below) will pass through (or over, if they're flying) Chanthaburi province and its capital, Chanthaburi (known as Muang Chan). This region is known for its tropical fruit and lucrative gem mines. Durian, pineapple, *lamyai* (longan), and rambutan thrive here. Don't be startled by the roadside 7.9m-high (26-ft.) durian "sculptures" you'll see piled at food stands along the way.

ESSENTIALS

Chanthaburi straddles the Chanthaburi River. The city's main avenue is Tha Chalab Road. The taxi stand and bus station (to Trat or Bangkok) are just west of the Chanthaburi Hotel on this street.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

In Taksin Park (the center of Chanthaburi), there's a statue of King Taksin on horseback, commemorating the victory over the Burmese in 1767, and a few temples built over Khmer ruins, highlighting the city's Cambodian connections. A large Catholic church, built in 1909, still stands in the center as well.

Gem Markets line the predictably named Gem Street, near the main market. If you are traveling in early December, take note—the annual Gem Fair packs the town with visitors. You may find a few choice rubies on offer, but no room at any inn.

The 17,000-hectare (42,000-acre) **Namtok Phlio National Park** is a popular day trip from Chanthaburi, as is **Laem Sadet,** a stunning beach and rocky cape located some 35km (22 miles) southwest of the city. Both sites can be visited by private car or taxi. Contact such agents as Thai South (www.thaisouth.com) for more details.

WHERE TO STAY

City lodging is spartan. **River Guest House** (3/5–8 Si Chan Rd.; ✆ **03932-8211**) is not quite downtown but offers basic and homey rooms (starting at 350B), with quieter (fan only) rooms out back. **K. P. Grand** (35/200–201 Trirat Rd.; ✆ **03932-3201**) is a smarter, modern facility with a pool, also a short way from the center. Its comfortable rooms start at 1,800B.

Chanthaburi is famous for its noodles, which are called *sen chan;* you can taste them at any of the food stalls down by the river, along with Vietnamese spring rolls and *muu liang*, a spicy pork broth. For a wide-ranging menu of Thai and Chinese dishes, such as spicy salads and thick curries, head for **Chanthorn Pochana** (102/5–8 Benchama-Ratchutit Rd.; ✆ **03931-2339**). They also serve wines made from local fruits, such as mangosteen, at very cheap prices.

If you're in the mood for Indian vegetarian food, make for the tiny **Sony Yadaw** (Si Chan Road; no phone), where you might also spot a few gem traders at work.

4 TRAT & KO CHANG

310km (193 miles) E of Bangkok

The capital of Trat Province is Trat, hitherto regarded as the gateway to the Ko Chang Marine National Park. Because of the region's direct transport links, though, visitors can now head straight to any of three piers to access the park's many islands, and it's becoming less of a gateway. On Ko Chang itself, a single, looping, cliff road runs along both coasts with the final, southern section nearing completion.

Despite having Marine National Park status, many of the islands here have been subjected to large-scale developments, particularly the largest, Ko Chang (Elephant Island), so called for its jumbolike outline, with its highest point some 740m (2,428 ft.) above sea level. This development, which has transformed the character of the island, was instigated by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra—a clear case of putting financial gain before ecological interests. For years, it was purely a foreign-backpacker and Thai weekend getaway, but now, with a glut of fancy resorts having opened, a more upscale international clientele is visiting. A luxury marina and condominium complex at Klong Son Bay, in the northwest, is under construction, and several international hotel chains now operate here. These developments are bound to bring more visitors, but the environmental impact on the waste disposal system and dry-season water supply is a concern.

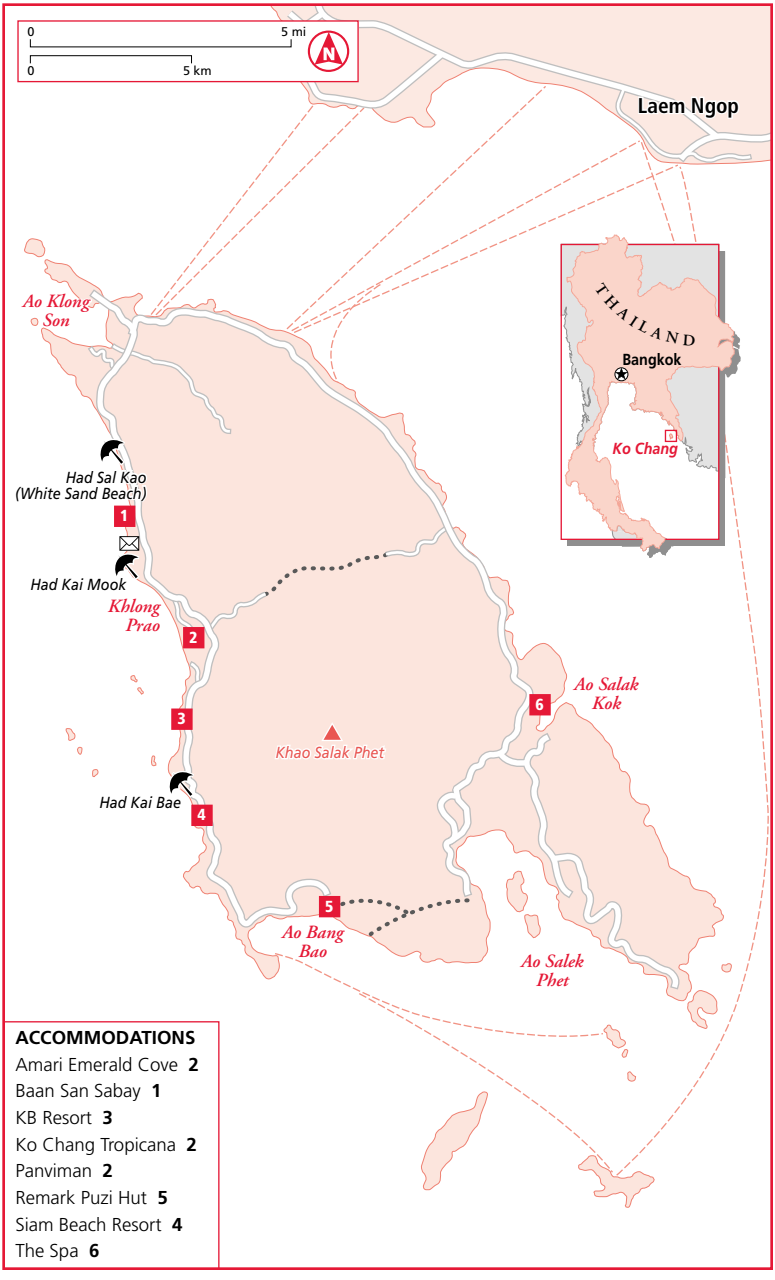
For now, adventurers will find plenty of activities, including elephant treks, waterfalls, and kayak trips through the mangroves in Ko Chang. The island also has a top-notch vegetarian detox retreat at the Spa Koh Chang (p. 172). Plus, in dry season (late Oct–May), there's good scuba and snorkeling.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

By Plane

Bangkok Airways (✆ **02270-6699;** www.bangkokair.com) has two to three flights daily, depending on the season, between Bangkok and Trat, each taking 55 minutes. Airport minivans serve Ao Thammarat pier, 15 minutes' drive away, from where the larger ferries serve Ko Chang; they will hang around if a flight is delayed. Prices start around 250B. Save time and money by asking your hotel to organize a round-trip transfer (it works out cheaper than a one-way). Some companies offer limousine transfers for around 500B, which often stop everywhere—check before you pay.


0
5 mi
0
5 km
N
Laem Ngop
Ao Klong Son
Had Sal Kao (White Sand Beach)
1
Had Kai Mook
Khlong Prao
2
3
Khao Salak Phet
Had Kai Bae
4
5
Ao Bang Bao
6
Ao Salak Kok
Ao Salek Phet
THAILAND
Bangkok
Ko Chang
ACCOMMODATIONS
Amari Emerald Cove 2
Baan San Sabay 1
KB Resort 3
Ko Chang Tropicana 2
Panviman 2
Remark Puzi Hut 5
Siam Beach Resort 4
The Spa 6

By Bus

From Bangkok's two **Eastern Bus Terminals,** at **Ekkamai** (✆ **02391-2504**) and **Khao San Road** (no phone), there are now dozens of buses direct to the three ferry piers; the trip time is around 5 to 6 hours. Fares range from 250B to 500B; the pricier tickets include the ferry. Buses usually stop at **Suvarnabhumi International Airport's Bus Terminal** (p. 72).

Daily minivans operate from Pattaya, via Ban Phe (Ko Samet's ferry port). From Pattaya, allow 4 hours, and from Ban Phe, you'll need 2½ hours; costs are 400B and 300B, respectively.

By Car

There are two routes out of Bangkok: the faster Bagna-Trat tollway, past Suvarnabhumi International Airport, and a route via Highway 3 to Chonburi. From the latter route, take Highway 344 southeast to Klaeng (bypassing Pattaya and Rayong), and then pick up Highway 3 again through Chanthaburi, after which you can turn south to Trat. This route takes about 5 to 6 hours.

Getting to Ko Chang & Beyond

There are now many ways to bypass Trat and go directly to or from Ko Chang from Bangkok. From Trat airport, **minivans** link passengers to Ao Thammachat pier (for Ko Chang only) or Laem Ngop piers, where during dry season (Oct–May), weather-beaten ferries cross to the nearby islands of Ko Chang, and much farther afield, Ko Wai, Ko Kood, Ko Maak, and Ko Kham. From Trat, ***songtaews*** (shared pickups) journey between all piers for around 50B. On the island, white *songtaews* charge from 40B to 100B to take visitors to their hotels. In low season, if you are alone, you may be obliged to charter the whole *songtaew* for 500B.

The fastest ferry service departs Ao Thammachat daily from 6:30am to 7pm (trip time is 30 min.) and lands at Ko Chang's Ao Sapparos. Ferries from here are more frequent in high season and on public holidays. One-way fares cost 80B, and a return trip is 120B. From the ramshackle Center Point Pier, it's 50 minutes and 100B one-way, 160B round-trip. Your slowest option is the cheap but infrequent fishing boat from Laem Ngob, costing 80B round-trip, which takes an hour to reach Dan Mai Pier, on the east of Ko Chang. If you are prone to seasickness, be warned that during the monsoon season (July–Sept), the crossing can be rough.

Visitor Information

The **TAT** has an office in Trat (Moo 1, Trat-Laem Ngop Rd.; ✆ **03959-7259**) and provides information about the nearby islands. At Bangkok Airways' information counter in Suvarnabhumi International Airport, or at Ko Chang's hotels, you can pick up the latest *Ko Chang Trat and the Eastern Islands* quarterly, with good maps and info. Another free magazine, *Guide to Koh Chang,* is available in many restaurants and resorts on the island.

The island's narrow, mountainous cliff roads are steep and perilous; road fatalities are common, so think very carefully before renting a motorbike, which can be organized through most resorts, starting at 200B per day. For emergencies, call ✆ **1719.** For serious injuries, Trat has a modern hospital at 376 Moo 2, Sukhumvit Rd., Wangkhrajae (✆ **03953-2735**).

Orientation

Ko Chang, Thailand's second-largest island after Phuket, is the anchor of the 52-island **Mu Ko Chang Marine National Park.** Thickly forested hills rise from its many bays, which, due to the tides, are narrow and rocky in wet season (June–Oct) and sandier in dry season (Nov–May). Coconut palms (and now billboards) dominate the west coast, and roads are hair-raisingly precipitous. Ferry piers are all in the north; fishing villages, mangroves, and orchid farms exist on the flatter and more tranquil east coast. In high season, some dive and boat trips leave from **Bang Bao Bay,** on the southernmost tip. The island's west coast is chockablock with resorts of all types and prices. At the northern end is **Had Sai Khao (White Sand Beach),** the busiest place to hang out. Its kilometer-long (⅔-mile) sands are now so crowded that it's been divided into "north" and "south," like Samui's Chaweng. More upmarket and family options abound at **Had Klong Phrao;** farther south, at the ramshackle **Had Kai Be;** and last of all, at **Bang Bao,** a stilted fishing village that suffers badly from a terrifyingly roller coaster–like road and trash-strewn mud flats.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Five-star resorts on Ko Chang undoubtedly offer the area's best gourmet choices, while roadside diners and seafood shacks are great budget options. **Invito** (✆ **03955-1326**), on Had Sai Khao, serves wood-fired pizzas. Or splash out on the modern Italian fare on offer at Amari's **Sassi** (✆ **03955-2000**), in Klong Phrao. On Had Sai Khao is **Paddy's Palms** (✆ **084930-3240**), serving Sunday roasts and British pub grub as well as Guinness. Farther south, you'll find **Cinnamon,** at Aana resort (✆ **03955-1539**), which serves up Thai seafood favorites. **Crust** (✆ **03955-7157**) is a delightful bakery that serves fresh breads, sandwiches, and cakes in Klong Phraew (opposite the temple). For sublime veggie food, head to the **Spa** (✆ **03955-3093**), at Salak Kok; it's worth the hike.

Trat

If you arrive after the last ferry and get stranded, head into Trat. The **Muang Trat Hotel,** at 40 Wijitjanya Rd. (✆ **03951-1091**), has 140 very basic rooms: A double with a fan costs 250B, or it's 370B for a double with air-conditioning.

Ko Chang

Accommodations-wise, Ko Chang has everything for everyone, from cheap jungle huts to full-on luxury resorts; keep in mind that smaller places will be very much DIY. If you fancy a week of serious detox, colonics, meditation, and yoga, head to the **Spa Koh Chang** (p. 172)—it's the sole upscale resort on the peaceful, less-developed east coast.

Nightlife and cheap eats are available all down the west coast from **Had Sai Khao** (White Sand Beach), through **Had Kai Mook** (Pearl Beach), **Laem Chaichet, Had Klong Phrao, Kai Bae, Had Tha Nam** (Lonely Beach), and **Bai Lan** down to **Bang Bao.** Some great seafood can also be found at no-name shacks on the east coast.

Ao Klong Son to Had Klong Phrao

The buzzing northern strip of Had Sai Khao and Had Kai Mook tends to pull in budget travelers, while Had Klong Phrao is more upscale. In between, Laem Chai Chet offers a relatively quieter option.

Expensive

Amari Emerald Cove Resort ★★★ Kids Affordable luxury is the watchword at this glamorous resort. The Amari Emerald Cove is truly a study in contemporary comfort. Three-story guest-room wings skirt a delightful courtyard with walkways and lotus ponds. A huge jade-green pool overlooks the ocean, while there's a smaller bathing pool for kids. Rooms are oversized, with slate tile and wood floors. Outstanding beige marble bathrooms and humongous tubs are an unexpected luxury. Wi-Fi is available throughout, and the efficient and helpful staff provides comprehensive tour info.

The resort's restaurants offer spicy Thai fare, modern Italian dishes, or international cuisine. Romantic seafood suppers can be arranged on the quiet, sandy beach, too. The Breezes bar rocks until 11pm (except Mon) with a sizzling Filipino band; meanwhile, the kids can stay home and goggle at free DVDs, or enjoy the pool or play in an airy game room. The Sivara Spa offers a range of professional therapies in delightful seaside bungalows.

88/8 Moo 4, Had Klong Phrao, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-2000.** Fax 03955-2001. www.amari.com/emeraldcove. 165 units. 6,339B–8,059B superior/deluxe double; 15,736 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars, 1 w/live music; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 pools; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD player, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Koh Chang Tropicana Resort & Spa ★ Palm-fringed bungalows scattered across gardens with ponds and tropical flora give this sprawling resort a Robinson Crusoe–like feel. A wide range of rustic one- and two-story bamboo and rattan rooms are on offer; the pricier ones are free-standing. For a small extra charge, opt for one with sea views. All come with tiled bathrooms, inside and outdoor showers, and petite sun decks. The majority are surprisingly well maintained. The huge beach restaurant sits on a vast wooden deck next to the crashing surf, which competes with the Filipino band. The nearby Sunset bar is a pleasant place for sundowners. A professional yoga tutor teaches classes near the beach and there are sea kayaks for rent. Reservations should be made in advance through the Bangkok office.

26/3 Moo 4, Had Klong Phrao, Ko Chang 23120. ✆ **02642-4420** in Bangkok. Fax 02642-4300. www.kohchangtropicana.net. 156 units. 4,900B–8,800B superior, deluxe, and suites. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; pool; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Panviman ★★ The Panviman is another luxurious option on Klong Phrao Beach; its spacious grounds are meticulously manicured, and the pool is a beautiful little meander flanked on one side by a casual bar, on the other by the resort's fine dining—everything oriented to great views of the sea (with the accompanying great sunsets). The excellent spa offers the chance of a memorable beachside treatment. Rooms are set in high-peaked, Thai-style buildings with arching roofs. They're done in tile and teak, each with canopy bed, large sitting area, balcony, and huge stylish bathroom. It's not a private beach, but the resort is far south of central White Sand Beach, so even in high season you might have a vast stretch of sand to yourself.

8/15 Moo 4, Had Klong Phrao, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-1290,** or 02910-8660 in Bangkok. Fax 03955-1283. www.panviman.com. 50 units. 8,000B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; fitness center; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Moderate

There are plenty of midrange places along busy Had Sai Khao, but a couple of the more popular larger hotels are the concrete behemoth **Cookies Hotel** (✆ **03955-1056;**

www.cookieskohchang.com) and the more rustic **KC Grande Resort** (✆ **03955-2111;** www.kckohchang.com). Both have pools and a wide range of rooms beginning at around 2,000B.

Inexpensive

Baan San Sabay Resort ★ (Value) This pocket-sized bungalow resort is on the lower end of Had Sai Khao, opposite the Ko Chang Clinic, on the beach side. Rooms are clean, with rattan and wood decor, balconies, and small but adequate en suite shower rooms. All the basics are available, including air-conditioning, making it a good-value stopover in the busiest part of the island. It's a few minutes to the roadside restaurants. Because it's so small, you should book well ahead.

16/8 Had Sai Khao, Ko Chang 23120. ✆ **03955-1061.** Fax 03955-1063. 6 units 1,400B–1,800B detached bungalows. No credit cards. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Kai Bae to Bang Bao

Moderate

KB Resort ★★ (Kids) Off the busy main drag but still only a short walk to shops, this simple bungalow property perches amid well-kept lawns and gardens, a few steps from the beach. Free-standing bungalows (of varying size and quality) sleep up to four—making this a good value for families. Resort accommodations run from basic to top-end beachfront villas—the latter have extra amenities such as DVD players. All rooms are decorated with simple wood furnishings and bright yellow walls. As added bonuses, the beach here is not as crowded as farther north, and there's a decent pool and Thai massage services.

10/16 Moo 4, Had Kai Bae, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-7125.** www.kbresort.com. 46 units. 1,150B–5,000B. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C in some, satellite TV, fridge.

Siam Beach Resort ★★ (Value) This popular resort looks older than its 2 years, but—for the moment—it is still a charming, good-value hideaway with direct beach access. Accommodations come in two-story (upper or lower) units, built amid gardens. Newer, more expensive luxury accommodations (complete with extra luxuries such as a DVD player, flatscreen TV, and MP3 player) and pool villas arrived in late 2007, along with a spa. The best-value rooms are currently those on the upper floors, located around a lagoon-style pool. All are airy with excellent amenities, bathtubs, and showers. There's delightful in-house dining near the sea and a helpful reception staff that can advise on tours.

100/1 Moo 4, Had Tha Nam (Lonely Beach), Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **08914-65995** (mobile). Fax 03955-8082. www.siambeachkohchang.com. 60 units. From 2,500B deluxe; 5,900B pool villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; beach bar; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C in some, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Remark Puzi Hut ★ About as far off the track as you can get in Ko Chang, and quite difficult to reach in wet weather, this quaint little collection of thatched huts sits on the southern tip of the island, near Bang Bao pier. Choose from seaview or gardenview rooms with fans. Each hut is raised on stilts, with a basic bathroom and lots of rattan decor, and is positioned in a shady coconut grove.

11/1 Moo 1, Bang Bao Bay, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-8116.** Fax 03955-8117. www.remarkpuzi.com. 20 units. 400B–800B double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C in some.

The Spa, Koh Chang ★★ (Finds) Far away from the busy west-coast strip, this delightful health retreat, has offered very reasonably priced 4- to 7-day fasting retreats and colonic cleansing for over a decade. However, you don't have to detox to stay here as a guest (slightly different rates apply for nonfasters). Rooms are set in stilted one- and two-story houses built of rustic recycled wood, which stand almost hidden from view by a lush hillside garden. The resort's rooms are a delightful mix of modern Thai-European, with sleek bathrooms of polished terrazzo, DVD players, and good-size balconies. The restaurant is open to anyone and serves superb vegetarian food, smoothies, and powerfully cleansing shots of homegrown wheat grass or the green herb *gotakula,* but there's plenty of choices for carnivores (or nonfasters), all made of wholesome organic produce. A pool sits among sculpted rocks and tropical flora next to a vast pond, yoga and massage pavilion, and delightful sauna.

15/4 Moo 4, Salak Kok, Ko Chang 23170. ✆ **03955-3091.** Fax 03955-3093. www.thespakohchang.com. 26 units. 3,950B–4,800B. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer.

ACTIVE PURSUITS

Diving & Snorkeling

Dive and snorkeling trips operate here only in the dry season, from mid-October until May; most trips head to the islands of Ko Khlum and Ko Wai (a particularly beautiful island), or to Ko Phrao (for wreck dives). **Ploy Scuba** (✆ **086-155-1331;** www.ploys cuba.com) is just one of the island's many diving multilingual outfits.

Ko Chang Adventure: Hiking, Kayaking & Elephant Safaris

Several well-marked hiking trails crisscross the island's peaks, but possibly the most enjoyable leads up from Had Klong Phraew to **Klong Plu Waterfall,** which is most spectacular July through August.

Three operators run elephant treks on Ko Chang, but the best regarded is **Ban Kwan Chang,** in the north at Ban Klong Son village (✆ **081-919-3995**). You can book tours of varying durations (starting at 8am) at most hotels, which can involve an elephant safari, a short performance and painting, and then a chance to feed the animals before a splashy bath.

During the dry season, bands of budding Indiana Joneses can explore the east coast's mangrove forests via the **Salak Kok Community Foundation** (✆ **084-106-7541**). The foundation organizes a two-man kayak for 100B per hour, or a more interesting guided mangrove tour for 200B. It also arranges sunset suppers, on a small boat in Salak Kok bay, for 1,400B per person (minimum of four persons).

More outdoor fun can be had at the **Treetop Adventure Park** (✆ **084-310-7600**), in Bai Lan, where you can teeter along walkways and whiz along ziplines suspended over the jungle. Some operators are also offering **Dolphin Tours,** but the keen-eyed may be able to spot these delightful creatures without help in October—they perennially bound alongside the ferries as they cross the short channel.

9

Southern Peninsula: The East Coast & Islands

Thailand's slim peninsula extends 1,250km (777 miles) south from Bangkok to the Malaysian border at Sungai Kolok. The towns of **Cha-Am** and the royal retreat of **Hua Hin** are just a short hop south of Bangkok, and the ancient temples of **Phetchaburi**—the last outpost of the Khmer Empire—are a good day trip from there. Passing through such coastal towns as Prachuap Kiri Khan and Chumphon and heading farther south, you come to **Surat Thani,** the jumping-off point for islands in the east: **Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan,** and **Ko Tao.** If the beach resorts of Phuket dominate the tourist landscape on the west coast, Ko Samui, a heavily developed resort island in the Gulf of Siam, dominates the east. Nearby Ko Pha Ngan, famed for its wild full-moon parties, continues to gain prominence as a rustic resort destination, as does Ko Tao for its access to some of Thailand's best dive sites.

With its fine islands and beaches, the Gulf of Siam is truly Thai paradise. Whether you come armed with little money and lots of time, or lots of money and little time, there's an adventure and a little bit of heaven for everyone among its palm-draped beaches, lacy coral reefs, small mainland towns and fishing villages, and Buddhist retreats.

1 HUA HIN/CHA-AM ★

Hua Hin: 265km (165 miles) S of Bangkok; 223km (139 miles) N of Chumphon. Cha-Am: 240km (149 miles) S of Bangkok; 248km (154 miles) N of Chumphon

Hua Hin and Cha-Am, neighboring towns on the Gulf of Thailand, together are the country's oldest resort area. Developed in the 1920s as getaways for Bangkok's elite, the beautiful "Thai Riviera" was a mere 3 or 4 hours' journey from the capital by train, thanks to the southern railway's completion in 1916. The Thai royal family was the first to embrace these two small fishing villages as the perfect location for summer vacations and for health retreats. In 1924, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) built the royal Maruekatayawan Palace amid the tall evergreens that lined these stretches of golden sand. Around the same time, the Royal Hua Hin golf course opened as the first course in Thailand. As Bangkok's upper classes began building summer bungalows along the shore, the State Railway opened the Hua Hin Railway Hotel for tourists, which stands today as the Sofitel Centara Grand Resort and Villas. To this day, the King of Thailand spends much of his time at his regal residence just north of town (note the constant presence of Royal Thai Naval frigates offshore). Yet despite the town's venerable connections, the beaches here cannot compare with those on the offshore islands, and the sea is often murky.

When Pattaya, on Thailand's eastern coast, hit the scene in the 1960s, it lured vacationers away from Hua Hin and Cha-Am with promises of a spicier nightlife. Since then, Pattaya's tourism has grown to a riotous, red-light din, and Hua Hin and Cha-Am are a

discerning alternative, though a few hostess bars have opened in downtown Hua Hin. These days, the younger generation of Thais are driving 45 minutes farther south to Pranburi, where a clutch of Thai-run resorts on isolated beaches are drawing well-heeled families away from Hua Hin.

Plan your trip for the months between November and May for the most sunshine and least rain, but note that from about mid-December to mid-January, Hua Hin and Cha-Am reach peak levels, and bookings should be made well in advance. Low season means more rain, but rarely all day long.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE Currently no flights serve Hua Hin, though there is an airport and a service may be introduced, so it's worth checking with tour operators.

BY TRAIN Both Hua Hin and Cha-Am are reached via the train station in Hua Hin, which has been well-preserved and is an attraction in itself. Twelve trains make the daily trek from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **02621-8701** or 1690). A second-class seat in an air-conditioned compartment from Bangkok to Hua Hin generally costs 382B, and the trip takes nearly 4 hours.

The **Hua Hin Railway Station** (✆ **03251-1073**) is at the tip of Damnoenkasem Road, which slices through the center of town straight to the beach. Pickup trucks acting as taxis (*songtaews*) and tuk-tuks wait outside to take you to your hotel; fares start at 50B.

BY BUS/MINIBUS Going by road is the best choice from Bangkok to Hua Hin and the best means of transport are the minibuses that connect with central Cha-Am and Hua Hin. You can arrange **minivan connections** from your hotel in the city, or go to the busy traffic circle at the base of the **Victory Monument** (a stop on the BTS) and look for the minivans that depart when full throughout the day, which cost just 200B to Hua Hin.

Regular buses depart from **Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111**) every 40 minutes from 4am to 10pm (155B). There are also daily buses to Cha-Am hourly between 4am and 8pm (140B).

Buses from Bangkok arrive in **Hua Hin** at the air-conditioned bus station (✆ **03251-1230**) on Srasong Road, 1 block north of Damnoenkasem Road. From here it is easy to find a *songtaew* or tuk-tuk to take you to your destination. The **Cha-Am bus station** (✆ **03242-5307**) is on the main beach road.

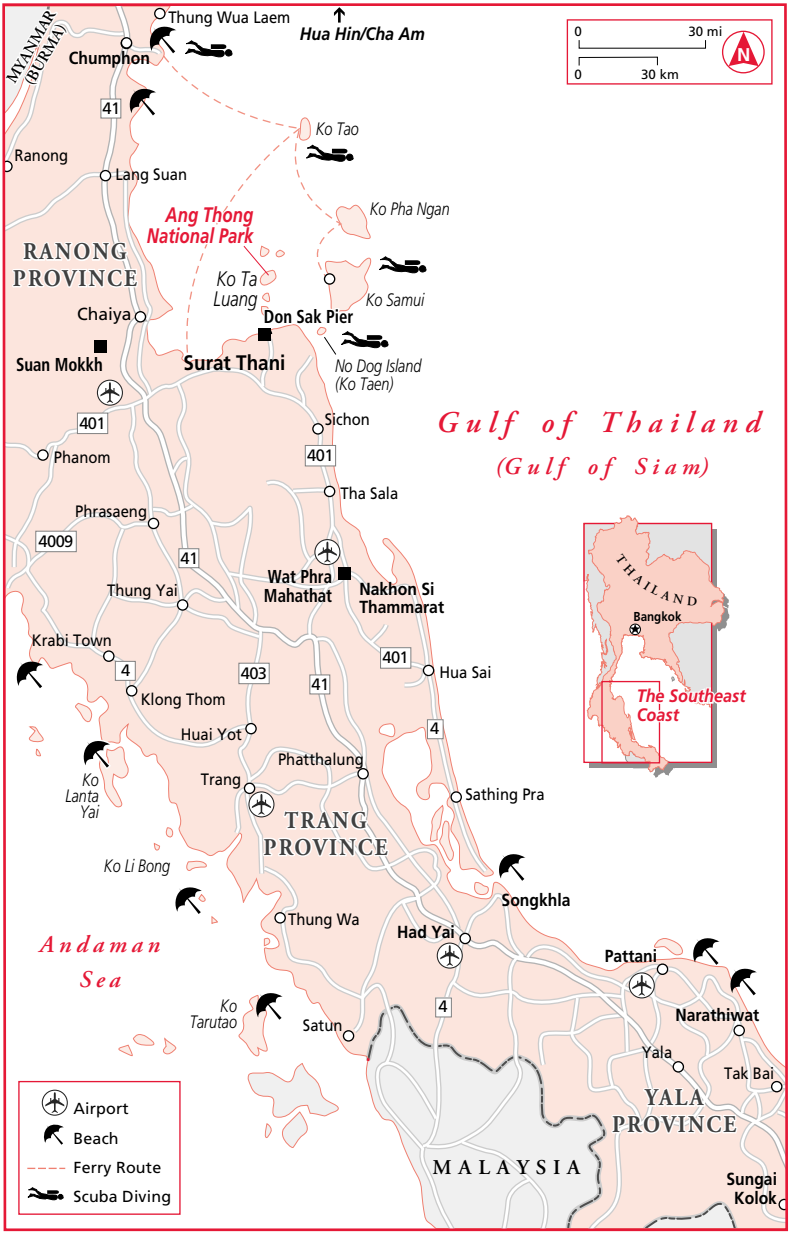
BY CAR From Bangkok, take Route 35, the Thonburi-Paktho Highway, southwest; allow 2 to 4 hours, depending on traffic.

Special Events

A free **jazz festival** is held annually in June over 2 or 3 days, featuring local and international bands. The event attracts thousands of visitors to a unique beach setting, with a stage usually set up in front of the Sofitel hotel. Spectators sit on the sand or can hire chairs. Extra jazz events take place around town at the same time. The event date varies annually. See www.huahinafterdark.com/events, or contact the Hua Hin Tourist Information Center at ✆ **03261-1491.**

Orientation

Despite all the tourist traffic, Hua Hin is easy to navigate. The main artery, Petchkasem Road, runs parallel to the waterfront about 4 blocks inland. The wide Damnoenkasem


MYANMAR (BURMA)
Thung Wua Laem
Hua Hin/Cha Am
Chumphon
0
30 mi
0
30 km
41
Ko Tao
Ranong
Lang Suan
Ko Pha Ngan
Ang Thong National Park
RANONG PROVINCE
Ko Ta Luang
Ko Samui
Chaiya
Don Sak Pier
Suan Mokkh
Surat Thani
No Dog Island (Ko Taen)
401
Sichon
Gulf of Thailand
(Gulf of Siam)
Phanom
401
Tha Sala
Phrasaeng
4009
41
Wat Phra Mahathat
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Thung Yai
THAILAND
Bangkok
Krabi Town
4
403
41
401
Hua Sai
The Southeast Coast
Klong Thom
Huai Yot
4
Phatthalung
Ko Lanta Yai
Trang
Sathing Pra
TRANG PROVINCE
Ko Li Bong
Songkhla
Thung Wa
Had Yai
Andaman Sea
Pattani
Ko Tarutao
4
Satun
Narathiwat
Yala
Tak Bai
YALA PROVINCE
MALAYSIA
Sungai Kolok
Airport
Beach
Ferry Route
Scuba Diving

Road cuts through Petchkasem and runs straight to the beach. On the north side of Damnoenkasem, toward the waterfront, you'll find a cluster of guesthouses, restaurants, shopping, and nightspots lining the narrow lanes. Across Petchkasem to the west are the bus terminals, railway station, and night market.

Smaller Cha-Am is a 25-minute drive north of Hua Hin along Petchkasem Road. Ruamchit Road, also known as Beach Road, hugs the shore and is lined with shops, restaurants, hotels, and motels. Cha-Am's resorts line the 8km (5-mile) stretch of beach that runs south from the village toward Hua Hin.

Getting Around

BY SONGTAEW Pickup trucks follow regular routes in Hua Hin, passing the railway station and bus terminals at regular intervals. Flag one down that's going in your direction. Fares are 10B within town, while stops at outlying resorts cost up to 50B. If the truck is empty, the driver will likely demand an extortionate fee; just wait till a shared truck comes along.

BY TUK-TUK Tuk-tuk rides are negotiable; always agree on a price before you start, but expect to pay at least 50B for a ride within town.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI Within each town, motorcycle taxi fares begin at 30B. These taxis, whose drivers are identifiable by colorful numbered vests, are a good way to get to your resort, if you're in Cha-Am after hours. A ride from there costs about 150B.

BY SAMLOR Trishaws, or *samlors* (bicycle taxis), can be hired for short distances in town, from 40B. You can also negotiate an hourly rate.

BY CAR OR MOTORCYCLE **Avis** has an office at 15/112 Petchkasem Soi 29, in Hua Hin (✆ **03254-7523**). **Budget** has an office at the Grand Hotel (✆ **03251-4220**). Self-drive rates start at around 1,400B. Call ahead to reserve at least a day in advance. A cheaper alternative is to rent from one of the small-time agents near the beach on Damnoenkasem Road. A Suzuki Caribbean goes for around 1,100B per day. Motorbikes (100cc) are available for about 200B per day.

ON FOOT Hua Hin is a labyrinth of busy streets and narrow alleys, with little guesthouses, colorful local bars, and a wide assortment of casual eating venues. Almost everything in town is accessible on foot.

Visitor Information

The **Hua Hin Tourist Information Center** (✆ **03261-1491**) is on Chomsin Road, near the Chinese temple. Opening hours are from 8:30am to 4:30pm daily. The website www.tourismhuahin.com is also quite useful.

Fast Facts

IN HUA HIN All major banks are along Petchkasem Road, to the north of Damnoenkasem, and there are many money-changers throughout the town. The main post office (✆ **03251-1350**) is on Damnoenkasem Road, near the Petchkasem intersection. Both Hua Hin and Cha-Am have Internet cafes along the more-traveled shopping streets. The **Hua Hin Hospital** (✆ **03252-0401**) is in the north of town, along Petchkasem Road. Call the **Tourist Police** for either town at ✆ **03251-5995.**

IN CHA AM Banks are dotted along Petchkasem Road, and the post office is on Beach Road. The **Thonburi Cha-Am Hospital** (✆ **03243-3903**) is off Narathip Road. Internet access is available in a few places along Beach Road.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The stunning Khmer-style temples of **Phetchaburi** (see "Side Trips from Hua Hin & Cha-Am," at the end of this section) are the most significant cultural sites near Hua Hin and Cha-Am, but really what attracts so many to this area is what first attracted the Thai royal family: proximity to the capital; sandy beaches; watersports; and activities such as golf, scuba, and horseback riding. Hua Hin also supports fine resorts such as the Hilton, Hua Hin, which come with great facilities, extensive dining, and top-notch spas.

One of the oldest resorts here is the **Sofitel Centara Grand Resort and Villas,** originally built for Thai royalty and their guests in the 1920s. Visitors are welcome to wander around its pretty colonial buildings and gardens (don't miss the giant topiary elephant). High Tea at the Sofitel costs 690B per person; it not only offers a chance to sip tea and nibble scones in a lovely original wing of the hotel, but transports guests back in time to the era when Hua Hin was a getaway purely for the Thai upper crust.

Don't miss the town's **Night Market** (on Decha Nuchit Rd., on the northern end at town center), which is busy from dusk to late with small food stalls and vendors. There are also lots of shops in and around the central beachfront, and Hua Hin—not unlike most resort areas in Thailand—is a good place to get that suit made or buy a Buddha ornament.

The **Maruekatayawan Palace** ★, or the Teakwood Mansion (no phone; daily 8am–4pm; 90B), located on the coast halfway between Hua Hin and Cha-Am, is one of the country's most attractive colonial buildings and a must-see for anyone interested in architecture. Built and designed in 1924 by King Rama VI, it served for many years as the royal summer residence and is now open to the public. A stroll through the beautifully preserved rooms with their polished teak floors, period furnishings, and shuttered windows is enough to be transported back to another era. Wander along the raised, covered walkway to the pavilions over the beach (formerly the royal changing rooms) and feel the fresh sea breeze on your face.

The big standing Buddha and viewpoint from spiky **Khao Takiap (Chopstick Hill)**—a small cape 7km (4⅓ miles) south of Hua Hin (hop on a green *songtaew* for 10B)—is a pretty area worth a visit; if you climb the hill (272m/892 ft.) to enjoy the panoramic view, hang on to your bags and camera, as the local macaques will snatch anything unattended.

Pony riding is popular along the busy beaches at Hua Hin and Cha-Am. Frisky young fillies can be rented by the hour from 600B, but you'll need to bargain hard. At 100B for 10-minute kids' rides, you can ride with a Thai escort leading the pony (which is the safest way), or on your own if you're confident. If you're interested, take a walk down to the beach, and you'll be besieged by young men eager to rent out their ponies.

See "Side Trips from Hua Hin & Cha-Am," at the end of this section, for trips to nature sites.

WHERE TO STAY IN HUA HIN

Very Expensive

Anantara Resort and Spa ★★ A series of elegantly designed Thai-style pavilions are set in 5.6 hectares (14 acres) of possibly the most exotic gardens you'll see in Thailand, just north of Hua Hin. A lovely tapestry hangs prominently in the open-air *sala*-style lobby, which is tastefully decorated with ornately carved teak wooden lanterns, warm wood floors, and oversize furniture with Thai cushions. The Lagoon is an area of teak

pavilions surrounded by lily ponds; and from the hotel's most luxurious rooms, you can hear chirping frogs and watch buzzing dragonflies from wide balconies. Other rooms cluster around a manicured courtyard. Consistent with the lobby, rooms are furnished in Thai style, with teak and rattan furniture. Superior rooms have a garden view, and deluxe rooms overlook the sand and sea. Lagoon rooms have large patios perfect for private barbecues. Suites have enormous aggregate bathtubs that open to guest rooms by a sliding door. Fine dining includes an Italian restaurant, and the resort's spa is large and luxurious.

43/1 Petchkasem Beach Rd., Hua Hin 77110. ✆ **03252-0250.** Fax 03252-0259. www.huahin.anantara.com. 187 units. 10,200B–15,900B double; 22,200B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; children's playground; bike and motorcycle rental; fitness center; outdoor pool w/children's pool; room service; spa; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment and instruction. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Chiva-Som International Health Resort ★★★ One of the finest high-end health resorts in the region, this ultrapeaceful campus is a sublime collection of handsome pavilions, bungalows, and central buildings dressed in fine teak and sea-colored tiles nestled in 2.8 hectares (7 acres) of exotic tropical gardens beside the beach. Fine accommodations aside, what brings so many to Chiva-Som are the extensive fitness, spa, and holistic health facilities. There are more than 120 treatments and fitness programs, including tai chi, Pilates, yoga, and personal training.

Upon check-in, you'll have a brief medical check and meet with a counselor who can tailor a program to fit your needs, goals, budget, or package you have booked (there is a wide range). From there, guests might focus on early-morning yoga, stretching, and tough workouts, or go for gentle massages, aromatherapy, or even isolation chambers and past-life regression workshops. No children under 16 or mobile phones are allowed, and a 3-day minimum booking is required. Day-spa visitors are welcome. It all comes with a high price tag, but it is worth it.

73/4 Petchkasem Rd., Hua Hin 77110 (5-min. drive south of Hua Hin). ✆ **03253-6536.** Fax 03251-1154. www.chivasom.com. 57 units. Contact the resort directly about spa and health packages. $1,030 ocean-view double; $1,300 pavilion; from $2,050 suite. Nightly rate includes 3 spa cuisine meals per day, health and beauty consultations, daily massage, and participation in fitness and leisure activities. AE, DC, MC, V. Children under 16 are not permitted. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; airport transfers; bike rental; golf course nearby; fitness center w/personal trainer and exercise classes; indoor and outdoor pools; room service; his-and-hers spas w/steam and hydrotherapy treatments; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Hilton Hua Hin Resort and Spa ★★ Kids Right in the heart of downtown Hua Hin, this 17-story tower block overlooks the main beach. The staff is courteous and professional and the hotel is geared for families, with many facilities for kids. The beachside pool is luxurious. The property displays a top international standard and its environs are ideal for strolling the main beach area, in-town shopping, and nightlife. The breakfast buffet is spectacularly big. One restaurant features an in-house brewery producing three beers.

33 Naresdamri Rd., Hua Hin 77110. ✆ **03253-8999.** Fax 03253-8990. www.huahin.hilton.com. 296 units. 10,000B–13,100B double; from 13,500B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; childrens' center; health club; outdoor pool; room service; spa; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Expensive

Hua Hin Marriott Resort & Spa ★★★ Kids From the giant swinging couches in the main lobby to the large central pavilions, this hotel is done up in a grand, if exaggerated, Thai style. The Marriott attracts large groups but is a good choice for families. Ponds, pools, boats, golf, tennis, and other sports venues dot the junglelike grounds leading to their open beach area, and there is a good kids' club and even a zoo. The hotel is relatively far from the busy town center and provides shuttle service. Deluxe rooms are the best choice—large, amenity-filled, and facing the sea. Terrace rooms at beachside are worth the bump up. The spa is luxurious, too.

107/1 Petchkasem Beach Rd., Hua Hin 77110. ✆ **800/228-9290** in the U.S., or 03251-1881. Fax 03251-2422. www.marriot.com. 216 units. 8,000B–10,100B double; 10,400B beach terrace; from 18,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; children's center; golf course nearby; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Sofitel Centara Grand Resort ★★★ A stay at the Sofitel Centara is a luxurious romp into another time. Though it opened in 1922, it still offers the classiest accommodations in the area. Renovations over the years have expanded the hotel into a large and modern full-facility hotel without sacrificing a bit of its former charm. The whitewashed buildings, shaded verandas and walkways, fine wooden details, red-tile roofs, and immaculate gardens with topiaries create a cool, calm, colonial effect. There is a small hotel museum of photography and memorabilia, and the original 14 bedrooms are preserved for posterity. The original rooms have their unique appeal, but the newer rooms are larger, brighter, and more comfortable. Though they boast furnishings that reflect the hotel's old beach resort feel, they are still modern and cozy.

The adjoining **Centara Hua Hin Village** is also under Sofitel management and features luxurious, private seaside villas (42 in total).

1 Damnoenkasem Rd., Hua Hin 77110 (in the center of town, by the beach). ✆ **800/221-4542** in the U.S., or 03251-2021. Fax 03251-1014. www.sofitel.com. 249 units (including Centara Hua Hin Village). 6,400B–7,600B double; from 10,000B suite. DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lounge; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; kids' club; executive floor; golf course nearby; fitness center; 3 outdoor pools; room service; spa; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

There are lots of mid- and low-range choices in and around central Hua Hin. **City Beach Resort** (16 Damnoenkasem Rd.; ✆ **03251-2870;** www.citybeachhuahin.com) is fairly central, with a pool and nightclub (rooms from 2,240B), and nearby **Sirin Hotel** (6/3 Damnoenkasem Rd.; ✆ **03251-1150;** www.sirinhuahin.com) has smallish but smart rooms (from 2,500B), and also has an outdoor pool.

Inexpensive

Chomsin Hua Hin The rooms in this newish place are a bit cramped but very comfortably equipped, and some have small balconies looking out over a street of well-preserved buildings. It is well located between the beach and the night market. The friendly staff can help arrange outings to nearby attractions.

130/4 Chomsin Rd., Hua Hin 77110. ✆ **03251-5348.** Fax 03251-5336. 18 units. 1,200B–1,500B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Coffee corner; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Jed Pee Nong Hotel This hotel is a clean and comfy budget choice less than 100m (328 ft.) from the Sofitel. There is a small pool, and the simple balconied rooms are carpeted and have air-conditioning. The higher-priced rooms have better decor and hug the pool, cabana style. Its friendly staff and decent rates make it popular with Thai weekenders as well as tourists, so book well ahead.

17 Damnoenkasem Rd., Hua Hin 77110 (on the main street, near the town beach). ✆ **03251-2381.** Fax 03253-22036. www.jedpeenonghotel-huahin.com. 25 units. 1,700B–2,000B double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant (international); pool. *In room:* Minibar.

WHERE TO STAY IN CHA-AM

Along the quiet stretch between Hua Hin and Cha-Am, there are a number of fine resorts (and a growing number of condos). Cha-Am village itself is a bit raucous (the Ocean City, New Jersey, to Hua Hin's The Hamptons) and most stay outside of town; for in-town lodging, try the Cha-Am Methavalai, reviewed below.

Expensive

Dusit Thani ★ The Dusit has all the amenities of a fine resort. The elegant marble lobby features bronze horses and hunting tableaux; hall doors have polo mallet handles and other equine-themed decor. Guest rooms, renovated in 2007, carry the same theme and are spacious, with big marble bathrooms. Room rates vary with the view, although every room's balcony faces the lushly landscaped pool. Ground-floor rooms are landscaped for privacy, with private verandas leading to the pool and the beach. Suites are enormous, with elegant living rooms, and a full pantry and dressing area. For all its air of formality, the resort is great for those who prefer swimsuits and T-shirts to riding jodhpurs, and a relaxed holiday air pervades. All sorts of watersports are available on the quiet beach. It is a bit far from both Hua Hin and Cha-Am, but the resort is completely self-contained.

1349 Petchkasem Rd., Cha-Am 76120. ✆ **03252-0009.** Fax 03252-0296. www.dusit.com. 296 units. 8,500B–11,500B double; from 14,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes and motorbikes; executive floor; golf course nearby; fitness center; minigolf; huge outdoor pool; room service; squash courts; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

The Cha-Am Methavalai Hotel ★★ The Methavalai is the best of the ragtag collection in busy Cha-Am town. Large, clean, and on the main Beach Road in Cha-Am, it is convenient for the restaurants, shopping, and small nightlife scene in town. Guest rooms are painted from a pastel palette and are peaceful, all with balconies and sun decks and clean, but not luxurious, bathrooms. Rooms look out over the good-size central pool (front-facing rooms can be a bit noisy, though). If you want to stay in downtown Cha-Am, this is the best choice of the lot. There's even a Japanese restaurant on-site—a rarity in these parts.

220 Ruamchit Rd., Cha-Am 76120. ✆ **03243-3250.** Fax 03247-1590. www.methavalai.com. 215 units. From 3,190B double; from 6,270B pavilion and suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; babysitting; golf course nearby; pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Holiday Inn Regent Beach Cha-Am ★★ No relation to the Regent chain, this sprawling beachside property was taken over by the Holiday Inn group in 2006. It consists of 560 rooms, suites, and villas and offers a wide range of leisure and recreational facilities, including large pools, watersports, squash, and a small fitness area. The main

resort is set around a massive courtyard, while the Regency Wing and Anavana Villas provide more secluded options. Standard rooms are comfortable and affordable, done up like the average chain hotel. The resort is on the road between Hua Hin and Cha-Am and a long ride to either; there's a shuttle bus to Hua Hin and private taxis outside. This place is always busy on the weekends with Bangkok visitors.

849/21 Petchkasem Rd., Cha-Am 76120. ✆ **03245-1240.** Fax 03247-1491. www.chaam.holidayinn.com. 560 units. 2,600B–3,850B double; from 4,350B villas. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 pools; room service; squash courts; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE IN HUA HIN

If you wake up at about 7am and walk to the piers in either Hua Hin or Cha-Am, you can watch the fishing boats return with their loads. Workers sort all varieties of creatures, packing them on ice for distribution around the country. In both Hua Hin and Cha-Am, look for the docks at the very north end of the beach; to sample the catch, head for the string of open-air restaurants on stilts, along Naresdamri Road in Hua Hin, where prices are very competitive.

The Night Market on Dechanuchit Road, west of Petchkasem Road, in the north end of town, is a great place for authentic local eats for very little money. The resorts have more restaurants than there is room to list, and no matter where you stay, you'll have great dining options in-house. In town, there are lots of small storefront eateries and tourist cafes as well.

An old expat favorite, **Il Gelato Italiano** (✆ **03253-3753**), on Damnoenkasem Road, near Jed Pee Nong Hotel, serves the real deal: homemade Italian gelato. It's a good place to meet, greet, and people-watch.

Itsara ★ THAI In a two-story seaside home built in the 1920s, this restaurant has real laid-back charm, from the noisy, open kitchen to the terrace seating and views of the beach—it's quite atmospheric and a good place to get together with friends and enjoy the good life. Specialties include a sizzling hot plate of glass noodles with prawns, squid, pork, and vegetables. A variety of fresh seafood and meats are prepared steamed or deep-fried, and can be served with salt, chili, or red curry paste.

7 Napkehard St. (seaside, a 60B *samlor* ride north from the town center). ✆ **03253-0574.** Reservations recommended for Sat dinner. Main courses 120B–350B. MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Meekaruna Seafood SEAFOOD This small family-run restaurant, on a wooden deck overlooking the main fishing pier in Hua Hin, serves fresh fish prepared as you like it. Though it's surrounded by other seafood restaurants, there's no carnival barker out front to drag you in, and such a lack of hype alone is refreshing. They have great *tom yum goong*—also try the fried crab cakes, fish served in any number of styles, and baby clams fried in chili sauce.

26/1 Naresdamri Rd. (near the fishing pier). ✆ **03251-1932.** Main courses 150B–500B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 4–10pm.

ACTIVITIES

Golf

Probably the most popular activity in Hua Hin and Cha-Am is **golf,** and the town boasts some fine courses. Reservations are suggested and necessary most weekends. Many of the hotels run FOC (free of charge) shuttles, and most clubs can arrange pickup and drop-off to any hotel.

- **Palm Hills Golf Resort and Country Club,** 1444 Petchkasem Rd., Cha-Am (✆ **03252-0800**), just north of Hua Hin, is a picturesque course set among rolling hills and jagged escarpments (greens fees: 2,500B; daily 6am–6pm).
- **Royal Hua Hin Golf Course,** Damnoenkasem Road, near the Hua Hin Railway Station (✆ **03251-2475**), is Thailand's first championship golf course, opened in 1924. Don't miss the many topiary figures along its fairways (greens fees: 2,500B; daily 6am–6pm).
- **Springfield Royal Country Club,** 193 Huay-Sai Nua, Petchkasem Road, Cha-Am (✆ **03247-1303**), designed by Jack Nicklaus in 1993, is in a beautiful valley setting—the best by far (greens fees: 3,700B; daily 6am–6pm).

Watersports

While most of the larger resorts will plan watersports activities for you upon request, you can make arrangements with small operators on the beach (for significant savings). Most resorts forbid noisy **jet skis,** but the beaches are lined with young entrepreneurs renting them out for 2,000B per hour. **Kiteboarding** is also becoming popular on the beach to the south of town; the season runs from November to April and a 3-day beginner's course costs 11,000B. Contact **Kiteboarding Asia** (Soi 75/1, just south of the Marriott resort; ✆ **0815-914-593;** www.kiteboardingasia.com) for more details.

Western Tours (✆ **03253-3303;** www.westerntourshuahin.com) can arrange **snorkeling trips** to nearby islands for about 2,700B per person. Their office is at 11 Damnoenkasem Rd., in the city center.

Spas

Hua Hin is famous for its fine spas, and each of the top resorts features excellent services (see the Marriott, Anantara, and Hilton, in "Where to Stay in Hua Hin," above). There are lots of small massage storefronts in Hua Hin, but this is a great place to go upscale and get the royal treatment.

The best choice for a day of pampering is at **Chiva-Som** ★★★ (73/4 Petchkasem Rd., Hua Hin; 5-min. drive south of town; ✆ **03253-6536**), where you pay a lot and get a lot. There's nothing like it.

Far south of town, luxurious **Evason Resort and Spa** ★★ (9 Paknampran Beach, Pranburi 77220; 30km/19 miles south of Hua Hin; ✆ **03263-2111**), in and of itself, is a destination spa worth visiting, but also a fine stop for high-end day treatments. It's comparable in quality with Chiva-Som.

SHOPPING

Hua Hin is a popular tourist town and close to the country's largest city, and, as a result, it has all the good shopping services you would find in Bangkok—from fine tailors and jewelers to souvenir shops. The **Day Market** along Damnoenkasem Road, near the beach, features local crafts made from seashells, batik clothing, and other handicrafts. The 2-block-long **Night Market** on Dechanuchit Road, west of Petchkasem Road, is a great stop for tasty treats and fun trinkets. Beware of fake brands.

HUA HIN AFTER DARK

For nightlife, your best bet is Hua Hin. A 15-minute stroll through the labyrinth of *sois* between Damnoenkasem, Poolsuk, and Dechanuchit roads near the beach reveals all sorts of small places to stop for a cool cocktail and some fun. **O'Neill's Irish Pub,** on

Poolsuk Road, shows sports on TV and serves draught beer, while **Takaeng Bar,** on Soi Bintaban, offers live country and pop music in a rustic setting.

SIDE TRIPS FROM HUA HIN & CHA-AM

Phetchaburi ★★

Phetchaburi, one of the country's oldest towns, possibly dates from the same period as Ayutthaya and Kanchanaburi, though it is believed to have been first settled during the Dvaravati period. After the rise of the Thai nation, it served as an important royal military city and was home to several princes who were groomed for ascendance to the throne. Phetchaburi's palace and historically significant temples make it an excellent day trip. It is just 1 hour from Hua Hin.

The main attraction is **Phra Nakhon Khiri** (also called Khao Wang), a summer palace in the hills overlooking the city. Built in 1858 by King Mongkut (Rama IV), it was intended not only as a summer retreat for the royal family, but for foreign dignitaries as well. Combining Thai, European, and Chinese architectural styles, the palace buildings include guesthouses and a royal Khmer-style *chedi,* or temple. The Phra Thinang Phetphum Phairot Hall is open for viewing and contains period art and antiques from the household. Though it was once accessible only via a 4km (2½-mile) hike uphill, you'll be happy to hear there's a funicular railway (it's called a "cable car," but that's not an accurate description) to bring you to the top for 40B. It's open daily 8:30am to 4pm. Admission is 150B.

Another fascinating sight at Phetchaburi, the **Khao Luang Cave,** houses more than 170 Buddha images underground. Outside the cave, hundreds of noisy monkeys descend upon the parking lot and food stalls looking for handouts. Sometimes you'll find a guide outside who'll escort you through the caves for a small fee.

Wat Yai Suwannaram is a stunning royal temple built during the Ayutthaya period. The teak ordination hall was moved from Ayutthaya after the second Burmese invasion of the city (don't miss the axe-chop battle scar on the building's carved doors). Inside there are large religious murals featuring Brahmans, hermits, giants, and deities.

Another *wat* (temple) with impressive paintings is **Wat Ko Keo Suttharam,** also built in the 17th century. These representational murals, painted in the 1730s, even depict some Westerners: There are several panels portraying the arrival in the Ayutthaya court of European courtesans and diplomats (including a Jesuit dressed in Buddhist garb).

Another fabulous temple is **Wat Kamphaeng Laeng,** originally constructed during the reign of Khmer ruler King Jayavarman VII (1157–1207) as a Hindu shrine. Made of laterite, it was once covered in decorative stucco, some of which still remains. Each of the five *prangs* (towers) was devoted to a deity—the center *prang* to Shiva is done in a classical Khmer style. During the Ayutthaya period, it was converted to a Buddhist temple.

Lastly, the **Phra Ram Raja Nivesana,** or **Ban Puen Palace** (✆ **03242-8506;** daily 8am–4pm; admission 50B), is a nice stop. A royal palace built by Rama V, the German-designed grand summer home comes alive with colorful tile work, neoclassical marble columns, and floor motifs. Today it sits on military grounds and is a popular venue for ceremonies and large occasions.

Western Tours, 11 Damnoenkasem Rd. (✆ **03253-3303;** www.westerntourshuahin.com), has day excursions for 1,500B per person that includes most of these sights, or they can be seen on a day trip by rented car.

Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park

Just a 40-minute drive south of Hua Hin, Khao Sam Roi Yot, or the "Mountain of Three Hundred Peaks," is comparatively small in relation to the nation's other parks, but offers great short hikes to panoramic views of the sea. There is abundant wildlife here (seen only if you're lucky). Of the park's several caves, **Phraya Nakhon Cave** is the most interesting, housing a *sala* pavilion that was built in 1890 for King Chulalongkorn. For more information, call the national parks office at ✆ **02562-0760,** or check out their website at www.dnp.go.th. To arrange a tour, call **Western Tours** (✆ **03253-3303;** 1,700B per person). The tour stops at a pineapple plantation and fishing village before the short but steep walk up to Phraya Nakhon Cave.

A half-day trip to the Pala-U waterfall close to the Burmese border (63km/39 miles west of Hua Hin) is another nature trekking option. Nature trails take you through hills and valleys until you end up at the falls. Western Tours does the trip for 1,700B per person.

Prachuap Khiri Khan

If you've had enough of Thailand's many overdeveloped beach areas, the small town and beaches near Prachuap Khiri Khan (just a 1-hr. drive south of Hua Hin) might just be the answer. Some of the kindest people in Thailand live here, the beaches are lovely and little-used, and the town begs a wander. There is little in the way of fine dining and accommodations, but it is a good stop on the way south to Chumphon.

2 CHUMPHON

463km (288 miles) S of Bangkok; 193km (120 miles) N of Surat Thani

Chumphon was once known for simply being a stop on the way south; plans are now underway to transform this little town into a tourist hub. Today it's got a pier, completed in 2007, and is a busy transit point for boats to **Ko Tao** to the southeast and **Ang Thong Marine National Park** due south, both of which are popular diving areas. Surrounded by its famous fruit orchards inland, and a couple of great beaches, such as **Sairi Beach,** 22km (14 miles) east of town, and **Thung Wua Laem Beach,** 12km (7½ miles) northeast, it's a good place to slow down and take time out.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE Currently no flights serve Chumphon.

BY TRAIN Eleven daily trains stop in Chumphon from Bangkok. Call Bangkok **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **02621-8701** or 1690) for info. The priciest second-class sleeper fare to Bangkok is 770B, but prices vary according to upper/lower berths and whether the carriage is air-conditioned. **Chumphon Railway Station** (✆ **077-511103**) is on Krom Luang Chumphon Road, where there are oodles of restaurants and guesthouses.

BY BUS Standard air-conditioned buses depart from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal (✆ **02793-8111**). The trip lasts 9 to 10 hours and costs 340B. The main Chumphon bus terminal (✆ **07757-6796**) is 16km (10 miles) north of the town center (a tuk-tuk will cost around 150B).

BY FERRY **Songserm** (✆ **07750-6205;** www.songserm-expressboat.com) and **Lomprayah** (✆ **07755-8212;** www.lomprayah.com) run daily express boat services connecting Chumphon with Ko Tao, Ko Pha Ngan, and Ko Samui. Lomprayah also has a night boat. Expensive (and totally un-eco-friendly) speedboats run in dry season.

BY CAR From Bangkok, use Highway. 4 or Highway 35 (Thon Buri-Pak Tho) and join Highway 4; continue past Phetchaburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan to Chumphon junction, and then turn left along Highway 4001 to reach town.

Visitor Information

A tourist information office is on the corner of Sala Daeng and Krom Luang Chumphon Roads. A handful of local tour operators, such as **CS Leisure Travel** (✆ **07750-3001;** www.cslchumphon.com) and **New Infinity Travel** (✆ **07750-1937**), is located on Tha Taphao Road, a 10-minute walk southeast of the train station, or there's **Suwannatee Tour** (✆ **07750-4901**), on Rotfai Road.

Getting Around

BY SONGTAEW *Songtaews,* or covered pickups, cruise the main roads and charge about 20B to 40B per trip.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI Look for the colored vests designating motorcycle taxi drivers, and bargain hard. Trips start from 20B.

BY TAXI Taxis stop behind the old market, opposite Chumphon Bus Terminal. Vehicles can be hired to Lang Suan, Ranong, and Surat Thani; inquire at your hotel for details.

Orientation

Chumphon's center is small enough to negotiate on foot: Krom Luang Chumphon Road, near the railway station, is the place for dining and accommodations options, and Tha Taphao Road houses a variety of tour operators.

Fast Facts

Numerous **banks** sit on Sala Daeng Road, which runs parallel to Tha Taphao Road. The main **post office,** on Poramin Mankha Road, is out of the town center; mail can generally be sent from your hotel. For **Internet service,** the guesthouses and travel agencies along Tha Taphao Road can all assist. For **police** assistance, call ✆ **07751-1300.**

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Most guesthouses and tourist offices can arrange rafting trips and tours to local waterfalls in the nearby rainforest. The best beaches are **Sairi Beach,** for island excursions, and **Thung Wua Laen** beach, to the northeast of town, where kiteboarding is proving popular. Diving over Chumphon's offshore pinnacles reveals pristine reefs and abundant marine life—including whale sharks (in season), turtles, and a range of tropical fish.

The town of **Ranong** straddles the Myanmar/Thai border west of Chumphon and is a popular day trip because of its **hot springs.**

The **Chumphon National Museum** (Office of Archeology, Sam Kaew Hill, Na Cha Ang subdistrict; ✆ **07750-4105;** admission 100B) is open 9am to 4pm from Wednesday to Sunday and covers historic events such as the Japanese invasion in 1941 and the devastation caused by Typhoon Gay in 1989.

Expensive

Away Tusita Chumphon ★★ This swish resort of petite red-tiled villas is virtually unknown to tourists and takes Chumphon accommodations to a new level. Sitting on unspoiled Arunothai beach, Thai exteriors shield homey interiors that fuse flamboyant colors. Elegant bathrooms and an abundance of light are the main advantages, and the beach villas couldn't get closer to the sea if they tried. Service is good (though it should be exceptional, given the prices). A big plus is the high-standard restaurant.

259/9 Moo 1, Arunothai Beach, Paktako, Chumphon 86220. ✆ **07757-9073.** Fax 07757-9050. www.tusitaresort.com. 22 units. From 6,440B double; 18,200B beachside villas. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; spa; Wi-Fi; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Chumphon Cabana Resort and Diving Center ★★ Value Located 30 minutes from town on the fabulously tranquil Thung Wua Laen Beach, this low-rise, family friendly resort of staggered concrete rooms and pretty bungalows is looking a bit worn now, but still has great views, a 30m (98-ft.) pool, and, most important, an outstanding reputation for its ecological work. Part of the pull is the long list of activities and the organic rice and vegetable gardens. Produce from the latter gets served up in the superb seafood restaurant that's on-site. A regular shuttle bus runs guests to and from Chumphon.

69 Moo 8, Thung Wua Laen Beach, Chumphon 86230. ✆ **07756-0245.** Fax 07756-0247. www.cabana.co.th. 128 units. 1,500B double; 1,850B bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; bike rental; outdoor pool and children's pool; watersports equipment and dive center. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Inexpensive

Budget hotels with decent-enough amenities include **Sri Chumphon Hotel** (✆ **07751-1280**), on Sala Daeng Road. On Thai Taphao Road, there's **Chumphon Gardens Hotel** (✆ **07750-6888**) and the perennially popular **Suda Guest House** (Soi Bangkok Bank; ✆ **07750-4366**). Expect to pay between 250B and 500B at any of these properties.

WHERE TO DINE

The best bites can be had at the diners scattered around Tha Tapao and Krom Luang Chumphon roads, or the seafood eateries at the beach hotels. Try **PaPa** (Kromluang Rd.; ✆ **07751-1972**), a popular and affordable seafood restaurant, or **Fame,** on Sala Daeng Road (✆ **07757-1077**), which serves up tasty Western breakfasts, filling sandwiches, and Italian dishes such as pizza and pasta.

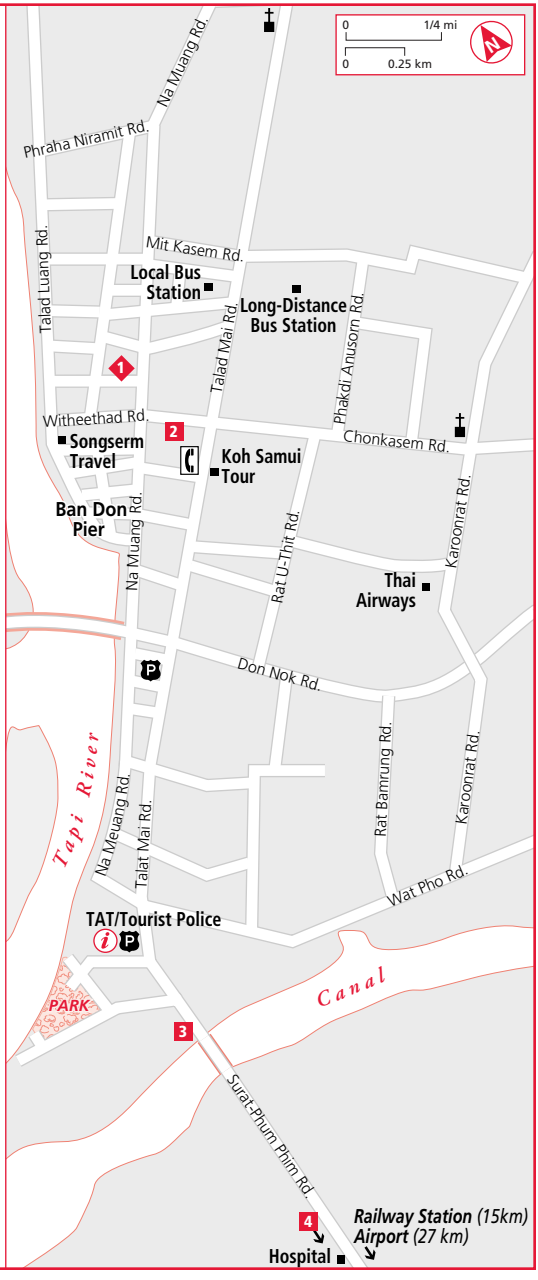
3 SURAT THANI

644km (400 miles) S of Bangkok

Surat Thani, or "Surat," was an important center of the Sumatra-based Srivijaya Empire during the 9th and 10th centuries. Today, it is a rich agricultural province yielding rubber and coconuts. Apart from its night market, its seedy massage parlors and pushy touts give it little appeal to the many travelers who use it merely as a gateway to farther destinations.

ACCOMMODATIONS ■
100 Islands Resort & Spa **4**
Tapee Hotel **2**
Wang Tai Hotel **3**

DINING ◆
Market **1**



Church
Information
Phone
Police

From Surat, you can access ferries to **Ang Thong Marine National Park,** as well as **Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan,** and **Ko Tao.** It's not impossibly far to the jungles of **Khao Sok National Park,** or to go west from here to **Phuket, Krabi,** and the **Andaman coast.** Popular local produce includes the Surat oyster and the rambutan (*ngor* in Thai). Near Surat is **Suan Mokkh,** an international meditation center (see "Day Trips from Surat Thani," at the end of this section).

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE From Bangkok, there are three choices. **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111;** www.thaiair.com) has two daily flights (trip time: 70 min.). Thai Airways' office is at 3/27–28 Karunrat Rd. (✆ **07727-2610**), just south of town. Budget airline **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999;** www.airasia.com) also has daily flights from Bangkok. **Air-conditioned vans** connecting the airport and town cost around 80B per person.

BY TRAIN Eleven trains leave daily from **Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station** (✆ **1690;** www.railway.co.th) to Surat Thani (trip time: 13 hr.). Second-class sleepers cost 848B, and second-class seats run 578B. Surat Thani station is some 12km (7½ miles) from town.

If you are connecting with the ferry, avoid the aggressive touts and look for representatives from the boat companies **Songserm** or **Panthip** (✆ **07727-2230**), who provide buses to meet trains. Otherwise, you can grab a shared minivan to town for around 80B, or a taxi for around 200B.

BY BUS VIP 24-seater buses leave daily from **Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111;** trip time: 12 hr.; 660B). ***Note:*** These buses are safer than the cheaper private buses, where organized theft is endemic. Air-conditioned buses leave daily from **Phuket's bus terminal** off Phang Nga Road, opposite the Royal Phuket City Hotel (✆ **07621-1977;** trip time: 4 hr.; 170B). The Surat Thani Bus Terminal is on Kaset II Road, a block east of the main road.

BY MINIVAN Privately operated air-conditioned minivans offer affordable and regular services from Surat Thani to/from Chumphon, Ranong, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Had Yai, Phuket, and beyond. The best way to arrange these trips is via your hotel's front desk.

BY CAR Take Highway 4 south from Bangkok to Chumphon, and then Highway 41 directly south to Surat Thani (trip time: 12 hr.).

Visitor Information

For information about Surat Thani, Ko Samui, and Ko Pha Ngan, contact the **TAT** office, 5 Talad Mai Rd., Surat Thani (✆ **07728-8818**), near the Wang Tai Hotel.

Orientation

Surat Thani is built up along the south shore of the Tapi River. Talad Mai (meaning new market) Road, 2 blocks south of the river, is the city's main street. The TAT office is on this same road but to the far west of town, en route to the bus and train stations. Ferry piers are on Ban Don, Na Meuang; out of town to the east is the Tha Thong pier. (Depending on your arrival hour, you can get transfers directly to the piers from the bus and train stations without going through town.)

Fast Facts

Major **banks, exchange kiosks,** and a branch of the **post office** lie along Na Meuang Road, close to Witeetad Road, in the center of town. The **Taksin Hospital** (✆ **07727-**

3239) is at the north end of Talad Mai Road. The **tourist police** (✆ **07720-0475**) are with the TAT, on Talad Mai Road.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Surat is a typical small Thai city, with few sites worth mentioning, though the day and night markets are worth a look if you have time to kill. Those with some extra time may want to head to **Khao Sok** and the beautiful Ratchaprapha Dam, or visit the small town of **Chaiya** and its Suan Mokkh monastery, a renowned Buddhist retreat with meditation study programs in English (see "Day Trips from Surat Thani," below). If you are in town at the end of Buddhist Lent (around mid-Oct), it's worth seeing the **Chak Phra festival,** where Buddhist images are towed up the river and boat races take place.

WHERE TO STAY

For most, Surat Thani is just a stopping-off point for trips to the islands. If you have a layover, the best choice in town is the **100 Islands Resort & Spa** (19/6 Moo 3, Bypass Rd.; ✆ **07720-1150;** www.roikoh.com), a fancy boutique hotel just south of the town center, with attractive doubles beginning at 770B. Nearby, with similar rates and a swimming pool too, is the **Wang Tai Hotel** (1 Talad Mai Rd.; ✆ **07728-3020**). More convenient to the market and town transport is the **Tapee Hotel** (100 Chonkasem Rd.; ✆ **07727-2575;** www.tapeehotel.com), with basic but clean rooms from 440B.

WHERE TO DINE

When in season, Surat Thani's famous oysters are on the menu at any streetside cafe; there is a small cluster of open-air eateries along Talad Mai (New Market).

DAY TRIPS FROM SURAT THANI

Chaiya Town & Suan Mokkhabalarama

The town of **Chaiya** itself is a little-visited stop on the southern railroad line, a kind of "Main Street, Thailand." There's an active central market and small stores by the dozen (look out for the old Chinese tea shops). Most people here are visitors to Suan Mokkh Forest temple, and the people of Chaiya are used to lots of wide-eyed foreigners wandering the town before and after retreats. There are a few Internet cafes along the main drag and food stalls selling low-priced Thai meals.

Suan Mokkhabalarama (the Grove of the Power of Liberation; better known as Suan Mokkh), just south of Chaiya, was founded in 1932 by the late Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, a widely published monk who is highly respected in Thailand. His back-to-basics approach attracts Buddhist monks and students of meditation from many countries, and his knowledge of English (among other languages) brought him many Western students in the 1970s and 1980s.

After his death in 1993, Bhikkhu bequeathed a large forest monastery to Dhamma study; foreign visitors are invited to join retreats from the 1st to the 10th of each month. Retreats are open to beginners, and applicants are accepted on a first-come basis from the end of each month (it's a good idea to pitch up a few days early, on the 29th or 30th, in high season). The meditation schedules are rigorous but short. Despite the rule of silence, there are opportunities to pose questions to monks, nuns, and lay volunteers.

Check in at the main monastery (follow signs to "information"), and then walk or ride the 1km (⅔ mile) to the retreat center. For 10 days of dorm lodging and meals, the recommended donation is 1,500B. See www.suanmokkh.org, or call the retreat manager at ✆ **07753-1552.**

Day visitors are welcome at the forest monastery, where you can wander the many jungle paths and visit the **"Spiritual Theatre,"** which Buddhadasa described as a pictorial interpretation of Dhamma featuring an eclectic mixture of Thai, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Tibetan, and European-style murals and sculptures. The monastery is just south of the town of Chaiya, 50km (31 miles) north of Surat Thani on Highway 41. Long-distance buses and public pickup trucks pass the entrance throughout the day and can drop you off as requested. *Songtaews* (pickups) costing 20B also connect to and from Chaiya; you have to wave them down.

A short ride north of Chaiya, the town of **Pum Riang** is a Muslim fishing village where there are many small storefront weaving factories still in operation.

Khao Sok National Park

One of the largest unspoiled areas of rainforest in the south, Khao Sok is known for its stunning scenery, caves, and exotic wildlife. The park is a convenient stop between Surat Thani and Phuket, and the main east-west road (Rte. 401) passes the park headquarters.

The park is some 646 sq. km (249 sq. miles) in area and is traced by jungle waterways; steep trails climb through underbrush, and thick vines hang from craggy limestone cliffs—imagine the jutting formations of Krabi, only inland. Rising some 1,000m (3,280 ft.), the dense jungle habitat is literally crawling with wildlife, such as tigers, leopards, and even elephants, but you may be hard-pressed to actually spot any. More commonly seen are guar, Malaysian sun bears, gibbons, magur, macaques, civets, and squirrels, along with more than 200 species of such birds as hornbills, woodpeckers, and kingfishers. As for the flora, it is equally varied. This is one of the rare places where you may come across the stinking "rotting flesh" odor that typifies the Rafflesia, the largest flower in the world. (The largest blooms are up to 1m/3¼ ft. wide.)

One of the best ways to get up close with the varied fauna of the park is by kayak, along the nether reaches of a large reservoir, about an hour from Surat Thani on Route 415. At **Rajaprarabha Dam,** you can go boating, rafting, and fishing among the limestone cliffs that appear as islands, or stay in beautiful floating bungalows and explore this pristine jungle on elephant back.

Farther west, the **park area** (off Highway 401, at kilometer 109) has several bungalow resorts in the jungle off the 1.5km-long (1-mile) entrance road, some set as treehouses. There are several Internet cafes, too. From here, well-marked trails lead you through the park. The park office can provide camping equipment, and guides will offer their services and help plan your itinerary.

Caution: It's important to know that waterfalls and caves pose real risks during rainy season. In 2006 and 2007, a number of Thai and foreign tourists lost their lives when flash floods inundated caves in this very park. Whether visiting the caverns and waterfalls, or considering a jungle hike or tubing down the River Sok, always book through a reputable travel agent so that help is at hand if you run into trouble.

Contact the **Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Office** (61 Pahonyothin Rd., Chatuchak, Bangkok 10900; ✆ **02561-0777;** www.dnp.go.th), or the TAT offices in Phuket Town (p. 228) or Surat Thani (p. 188), for maps and info. Alternatively, contact **Paddle Asia,** in Phuket (9/71 Rasdanusorn Rd., Tambon Rasada, Phuket 83000; ✆ **07624-0952;** fax 07621-6145; www.paddleasia.com), for details on their soft adventure trips.

4 KO SAMUI ★★★

644km (400 miles) S of Bangkok to Surat Thani; 84km (52 miles) NE from Surat Thani to Ko Samui

The island of Ko Samui lies 84km (52 miles) off the east coast in the Gulf of Thailand, near the mainland town of Surat Thani. Since the 1850s, Ko Samui was visited by Chinese merchants from Hainan Island in the South China Sea. The island is said to have more coconut species than any other place in the world. The harvesting of coconuts (and rubber) still takes place in the hills of the island's hinterland, but alas, many plantations have given way to wide-scale tourist development, which is now the island's main income.

Once a hippie haven of pristine beaches, idyllic thatched bungalows, and eateries along dusty red-dirt roads, Samui is now packed with upscale resorts, low-end bars, and posh spa retreats. Up to 20 flights a day land at Samui International Airport, and this voracious tourist onslaught has brought severe water shortages and environmental problems such as wastewater and refuse disposal.

If you leave the main tourist hubs, Ko Samui still has a few idyllic sand beaches and simple villages, but it is certainly not the sleepy island it was 20—or even 10—years ago, and prices reflect this.

Peak season is from mid-December to mid-January, but January to April has the best weather—before its gets very hot—with the occasional tropical storm bringing relief. Storms don't tend to last long, however, and as this is low season, more bargains can be found. October through mid-December are the wettest months, with November bringing some heavy rain and winds that make the east side of the island rough for swimming. July and August see a brief increase in visitors, but during those months, the island's west side is often buffeted by summer monsoons from the mainland.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111;** www.thaiair.com) now has at least a couple of flights each day from Bangkok to Samui, though **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02270-6699** in Bangkok, or 07742-2234 in Samui; www.bangkokair.com) is the main server, with more than 20 flights daily. Bangkok Airways also has two daily flights that connect with Phuket (Bangkok Airways' Phuket office is at ✆ **07622-5033**) and another daily flight that connects with U-Tapao airport near Pattaya (Pattaya office ✆ **03841-2382**). They also have convenient direct flights connecting Ko Samui with Hong Kong and Singapore.

Ko Samui Airport (✆ **07724-5600**) boasts open-air pavilions with thatched roofs surrounded by gardens and palms. If you're staying at a larger resort, airport shuttles can be arranged when you book your room. There's also a convenient minivan service from the airport that will cost you less than haggling with taxi drivers. Book your ticket at the transportation counter upon arrival, and you'll get door-to-door service for around 200B, depending on how far it is to your resort. A trip to the farther tip of the island (Laem Set) will take around 45 minutes. When you leave, keep in mind that there is a 500B departure tax from this airport.

BY FERRY **Songserm Travel** (✆ **07750-6205** in Surat Thani) runs a loop from Surat Thani pier to Chumphon, stopping at Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, and Ko Tao, and taking around 11 hours for the complete journey. Rates are 250B for Surat–Samui, Samui–Ko

Pha Ngan, and Ko Pha Ngan–Ko Tao; rates are 450B for Ko Tao–Chumphon. **Lomprayah** (✆ **07742-7765**) links the islands by high-speed catamaran and runs some specialized trips, with similar rates. **Seatran Discovery** (✆ **07747-1174**) offers a popular choice for comfortable interisland travel and day trips, and costs 140B from Surat to Samui. Car ferries run from Donsak pier, which is 60km (37 miles) northeast of Surat Thani. **Raja Ferries** (✆ **07742-3190**) offers a car and passenger service from Donsak to either Ko Samui (cost 450B) or Ko Pha Ngan (cost 620B). (There are still no connections for cars between the islands.)

You can buy ferry tickets at the port, although many book a bus or train ticket with the ferry ride included, from Bangkok or other points in Thailand. Not only does this work out a bit cheaper, but it also means you don't have to be troubled by touts along the way.

If you book ahead at a resort, most will arrange transport from the Samui ferry pier at Nathon to your hotel. Otherwise, songtaews make the trip to most beaches on the east coast for as little as 70B, if they can get a packed truckload from the boat landing (and it can be very packed). *Songtaews* make stops along the way as required, so you can jump on or off. There are also private taxis at the pier; expect to pay at least 500B from Nathon pier to Chaweng.

Orientation

Though Ko Samui is the country's third-largest island, with a total area of 247 sq. km (95 sq. miles), its entire coastline can be toured by car or motorcycle in about 2½ hours. The island's main road (Hwy. 4169), also called the "ring road," circles hilly, densely forested terrain. Ko Samui airport is in the northeast corner near Bo Phut. The ferries and express boats arrive on the west coast, in or near Nathon (depending on the boat).

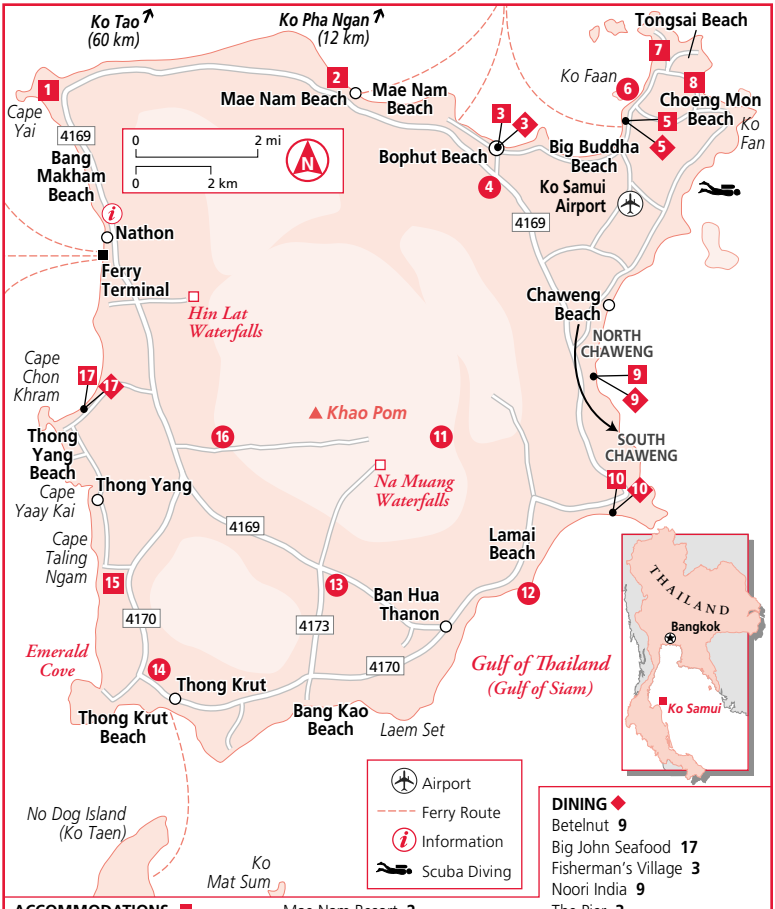
Samui's best beaches are on the north and east coasts. The long, sandy east coast is home to Chaweng and Lamai beaches, both frenetic in high season. It's here you'll find the heaviest concentration of hotels and bungalows. The south coast has a few little hideaways, and the west coast reveals a handful of sandy strips, but few amenities.

Nathon is where the ferries dock on the west coast, and being the island's main town and community, this is where you'll find banks, the TAT office, and the post office.

The Beaches

Clockwise from Nathon, **Mae Nam Beach,** on Samui's north shore, is 12km (7½ miles) from the ferry pier, facing nearby Ko Pha Ngan. The coarse sand is shaded by palm trees, and its peaceful calm bay has water deep enough for swimming; it is often spared the fierce winds that whip up during the stormy months. Although bigger, upmarket resorts are taking over here, too, there are still some affordable resorts and a number of simple, charming bungalows—it's fast becoming the budget choice on Samui. Ban Mae Nam, a small commercial hub, is just east of the Santiburi Resort and has lots of good little restaurants and shops.

Bophut Beach, the next village along the north coast, is one of the island's fastest developing areas. Bophut's long coarse-sand beach narrows considerably in the monsoon season, but the water remains fairly calm year-round. Turning off at "Big Buddha," there's a sign marking the entrance to **Fisherman's Village,** a delightful small street where you'll find restaurants and guesthouses among a beachside clutch of small houses and shops. It's definitely worth a wander.



ACCOMMODATIONS
Amari Palm Reef Resort **9**
Anantara Resort & Spa **3**
Ark Bar Garden Beach Resort **9**
Baan Taling Ngam Resort & Spa **15**
Bandara Resort **3**
The Briza Beach Resort & Spa **9**
Centara Grand Beach Resort **9**
Coco Palm Samui **2**
Coral Bay Resort **9**
Evergreen Resort **9**
Four Seasons Samui **1**
The Imperial Boathouse **8**
Kandaburi Resort & Spa **9**
Lamai Wanta **10**
The Library **9**
Lipa Lodge Resort **17**
Mae Nam Resort **2**
Mango Village **10**
Napasai **2**
Orchid Suites **10**
Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort **10**
Peace Resort **3**
Poppies Samui Resort **9**
Rocky's Boutique Resort **10**
The Saboey **5**
Sala Samui **8**
Santiburi Resort **2**
Six Senses Hideway **7**
Spa Samui Resorts **10**
The Tongsai Bay **7**
Tradewinds **9**
Weekender Resort & Hotel **10**
White House Beach Resort & Spa **8**

DINING
Betelnut **9**
Big John Seafood **17**
Fisherman's Village **3**
Noori India **9**
The Pier **3**
Poppies **9**
Quo Vadis **5**
The Spa Restaurant **10**
Vecchia Napoli **9**
Zico's **9**

ATTRACTIONS
Hin Ta & Hin Yai (Grandfather and Grandmother Stones) **12**
Magic Statue Garden **11**
Paradise Park Farm **16**
Samui Monkey Theater **4**
Snake Farm **14**
Wat Khunaram **13**
Wat Phra Yai (Big Buddha) **6**

Big Buddha Beach (Bangrak) is just east of Bophut and has a fairly clean, coarse-sand beach and a calm bay for swimmers (shallow in the low season, May–Oct). Many small restaurants, businesses, shops, and an increasing number of new resorts and taxis create a busier pace than is evident at other, more removed beaches. However, it is becoming a popular choice, with several new resorts that look out over Ko Faan, the island home of Ko Samui's huge seated Buddha. The Queen Ferry leaves from Big Buddha pier, taking Full-Moon partygoers to Had Rin on Ko Pha Ngan four times a day. Speedboats also leave from a nearby pier, departing hourly during Full-Moon Party time (see "Ko Pha Ngan," later in this chapter).

Ko Samui's northeastern tip features the beautiful headland of **Choeng Mon,** with stunning views all around from west to east; this is home to some of the island's most exclusive resorts. Bold rock formations create private coves and protected swimming areas—though from mid-October to mid-December, the monsoon can stir up the wind and waves, creating a steep drop-off from the coarse-sand beach, and a strong undertow. **Tongsai Bay** is a beautiful cove dominated by one resort (reviewed later in this chapter); its privacy is a plus or a minus, depending on what you are looking for.

Southeast of Tongsai, as the road descends from the headland down toward Chaweng, is the fine sandy stretch called **Choeng Mon Beach,** a gracefully shaped crescent about 1km (⅔ mile) long, and lined with shady palm trees (and an increasing number of shops). Swimming here is excellent, with few rocks near the central shore, although the water level can become very low from May to October (low season). Across the way is **Ko Fan Fa,** a deserted island with an excellent beach. You can swim or, if the tides are right, walk there—but be careful of the rocks at low tide.

Although Chaweng is the busiest destination on Ko Samui, if you don't mind the hustle and bustle (or Starbucks or McDonald's), it can be great fun. Money-changing, high-speed Internet cafes, laundry facilities, travel and rental agencies, medical facilities, shopping, restaurants, and nightlife are all on your doorstep. The two Chaweng beaches (**North Chaweng** and south **Chaweng Noi**) are the longest on the island, but, in some places, an offshore reef limits the water to wading depth only—an advantage if you have young kids. Still, you should at least take a wander here to see what you're missing. The more recently developed north end of the strip abuts the rocky coast, but the swimming is better to the south (though a bit shallow near the shore in low season).

The long sand beach of **Lamai Bay,** in the southeast, is comparable to Chaweng's, and although many top-range resorts are moving in, there are a few budget options offering bungalows at the north end of the beach. The town area is less developed but does have a wide range of services, cafes, and restaurants, although nightlife tends to center on the small bars on the main street. Samui's waterfalls lie inland of Lamai, toward Ban Thurian at Na Muang.

Laem Set Bay is a small rocky cape on Samui's southeast coast, with dramatic scenery that prompted the construction of a few resorts, some of which have been around for 25 years.

On the west coast, you'll find one of Samui's better beaches at Ao Phang Kha (Emerald Cove), south of **Ban Taling Ngam,** on Route 4170. Generally, the west coast beaches are the most isolated on the island, offering few facilities and rocky waters, making the beaches barely swimmable. Many Thai families stop for picnics at Hin Lat Falls, a rather uninteresting inland site 2km (1¼ miles) southeast of Nathon. Samui used to supply enough freshwater for the whole town, but now high-season droughts blight the island.

Visitor Information

The **TAT Information Center** is at 370 Thawi Ratchaphakti Rd. just north of the main ferry terminal in Nathon (✆ **07742-0504**). This office has TAT accommodation lists and information pamphlets, published annually, but such websites as www.kohsamui.org and www.samuiguide.com are often more up-to-date. Pick up free magazines, such as the *Samui Explorer, Samui Guide,* and *What's On Samui,* in restaurants, bars, and shops. *Samui Dining Guide* (www.samuidiningguide.com) lists the best restaurants on the island. You can also pick up any number of free maps with lots of adverts and info on spas, events, or fun local happenings.

Getting Around

BY SONGTAEW These pickup trucks are the easiest and most efficient way to get around the island and advertise their destinations with colorful signs. They follow Route 4169, the "ring road," around the island. Hail one anywhere along the highway and beach roads. To visit a site off the beaten track, ask the driver to make a detour. Most stop after sundown, after which they tour Chaweng. Daytime fares are fixed at around 40B to 60B, but after dark they charge like taxis; night owls face steep fares (500B and up).

BY RENTAL CAR Renting a car is far safer than a motorcycle, though the mountainous roads here have many hairpin bends and steep gradients. Remember your defensive driving skills; they will be required to navigate around common obstacles such as motorcycles coming at you in your lane, a wandering dog, or an intoxicated truck driver with a death wish.

Budget Car Rental (✆ **07796-1502**) has an office at Samui Airport and another at Chaweng Beach (✆ **07743-0022**). **Avis** (✆ **084700-8161,** mobile) and **Hertz** (✆ **07742-5011**) also have offices at the airport. All offer a range of vehicles, starting as low as 1,200B, and do pickup and delivery.

Local rental companies and travel agents have good deals for car rentals and they're generally sound. Bargains can come as low as 900B per day, but don't expect comprehensive insurance coverage. Read all the fine print, particularly how much you must pay in case of an accident.

BY MOTORCYCLE The roads on Samui are busy, narrow, and poorly maintained, with plenty of novice drivers (usually gung-ho foreigners). Road accidents injure or kill an inordinate number of tourists and locals each year, mostly motorcycle riders, but two wheels and a motor is still the most popular way to get around the island, so stick to the left-hand lane and go easy. A 500B fine is imposed on anyone not wearing a helmet, so keep it on despite the temptation to feel the wind in your hair. Technically, you should have an international license, but small operators rarely ask to see it; they prefer to keep your passport in case of problems. Travel agencies and small operators rent motorcycles, and most resorts can make arrangements. A 100cc Honda scooter goes for around 150B per day, while a 250cc chopper or trail bike starts at around 500B. For the best big bikes, look for **Ohm Cycles,** on the far southern end of Chaweng (on the road heading to Lamai; ✆ **07723-0701**).

Fast Facts

All the major **banks** now have branches in every town, with their main branches in Nathon along waterfront Thawi Ratchaphakti Road. You will find numerous money-changers and ATMs across every part of the island, many with Western Union **money**

transfer services; the latter has an office in Chaweng at the Centara Grand Beach Resort. There are post offices in Chaweng, Mae Nam, and Lamai—all on the main Samui ring road. The **main post office** is on Chonwithi Road in Nathon, but you probably won't hike all the way back to the main pier just for posting. Most resorts will also handle post for you, and stamps can be purchased in small shops in beach areas; be warned that any postcards you send will probably arrive long after you have returned home. For **Internet service,** there are numerous places scattered throughout the island. Try the kind folks at **Multi Travel and Tour** (164/3 Moo 2, Chaweng; ✆ **07741-3969**).

There are excellent private hospitals and 24-hour rescue and evacuation services if required. They are expensive but will deal directly with medical insurance companies. **Bangkok Samui Hospital** (✆ **07742-9500**) and **Samui International Hospital** (✆ **07723-0781-2**) provide top-class medical care. **Bandon International Hospital** (✆ **07742-5382**) is also a fine facility, with English-speaking physicians who make house calls. All are located around Chaweng.

For emergencies, dial ✆ **1155** or 07742-1281 for **Tourist Police.**

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Busy Samui has a host of entertainment apart from the usual beach outings. Have a look at "Exploring Ko Samui," at the end of this section, for more outdoor activities and happenings.

Many of the sites below can be seen on day trips or combined with **jungle tours** in jeeps, such as **Mr Ung's Magical Safari Tour** (✆ **07723-0114;** www.ungsafari.com), starting at a reasonable 1,700B (children 1,100B). Join in and enjoy the adventure—even lunch is taken care of. There are also several companies offering trips with multichoice activities, including **quad biking, jungle coaster cable rides,** and even **mountain biking**—so look around to find the best travel agent for you.

Samui has a number of important temples and Buddhist sites to visit. **Wat Phra Yai** is home to Samui's primary landmark, the **Big Buddha,** more than 12m (39 ft.) tall and the most important temple for the local islanders. It is set on Ko Faan, a small islet connected to the shore on the northeast coast by a causeway, with shops and restaurants at the base. Admission is free, but donations are accepted.

Two temples in Samui hold bodies of **mummified monks,** which some may find ghoulishly interesting. The most popular is **Wat Khunaram,** along the main road (Rte. 4169) as it shoots inland far south of Lamai. Here the **mummified body** of monk Loung Pordaeng is in the same meditation position, or *mudra,* as when he died over 20 years ago.

Four engraved imprints of the **Lord Buddha's Footprint** are held in a shrine near the turnoff to the **Butterfly Farm** off the 4170 Road near Laem Din. At the southernmost end of Lamai Beach lie Ko Samui's two famous rocks, **Hin Ta** and **Hin Yai,** Grandfather and Grandmother Stone, respectively. They have always caused a stir due to their likeness to male and female genitalia (you can guess which is which). The rocks are seen as strong fertility symbols, and local myth has it that these rocks were where a people known as the Mui originated.

Just across Route 4169 from Wat Khunaram is the dirt track leading up to the **Na Muang Falls,** one of which reveals a large bathing pool (be careful of sharp rocks). You can walk the steamy 5km (3-mile) trek from the coast road to the falls or take the easier route on the back of an elephant (any travel agency in town can arrange this). Once

you've finished your picnic, visit the **Wang Saotong Waterfall** a little farther off-road on the other side of Route 4169. ***Caution:*** Due to a fatal accident at a waterfall in 2007, visitors are warned to be aware of the likelihood of sudden landslides here during heavy rain.

You can escape the heat with the kids at Samui's latest attraction, **Paradise Park Farm** (✆ **07760-1015;** http://paradiseparkfarm.net; daily 9am–6pm; adults 300B, children 100B). The cool mountain air of the island's interior will be a welcome relief as you walk through towering natural rocks surrounded by waterfalls, small rivers, canyons, wildlife animals, and exotic birds. Here you can learn about rubber tapping and local flora and fauna. You can then dine in the restaurant, relax in the infinity pool with spectacular views down the valley, or unwind in the spa.

Also well worth a visit is the **Magic Statue Garden,** if only for the trek deep into the jungle-clad mountains. Built by local farmer Nim Thongsuk in 1976, when he was 77, it is now proudly maintained by his son. The road is challenging, so book with a tour company such as **Mr Ung's Magical Safari Tour** (✆ **07723-0114;** www.ungsafari.com).

The more adventurous can try being Tarzan and swing through the jungle with **Canopy Adventures** (✆ **07741-4150-1;** www.canopyadventuresthailand.com; 1,700B adults, 1,250B children). Or, if you prefer a quicker adrenaline rush, **Samui Bungy** (✆ **07741-4252**) is just next to the Reggae Bar.

If you don't intend to snorkel, but would like to sample some underwater life, **Samui Aquarium and Tiger Zoo** (✆ **07742-40178;** www.samuiorchid.com) is open daily from 9am to 5pm at Samui Orchid Resort, Laem Set Beach, and costs 600B (300B for children).

Most Thai tourist spots have a **snake show,** and Samui's snake farm is at the far southwest corner of the island, on 4170 Road (✆ **07742-3247;** http://samuisnakefarm.com), with daily shows at 11am and 2pm. Tickets cost 250B. **Samui Crocodile Farm** (✆ **07723-9002**) also has **reptiles and monkeys.** It's open from midday to 5:30pm daily and costs 500B for adults, 250B for children. At the **Samui Monkey Theater** (✆ **07796-01289**), just south of Bophut village, on 4169 Road, you can see "working" demonstrations of monkeys collecting coconuts. Show times are at 10:30am, 2pm, and 4pm daily; entrance is 300B for adults, 150B for children.

Watch out also for notices about seasonal **buffalo fights,** which vary according to Thai holidays. Rather than being bloody affairs, the animals in these competitions don't actually gore each other—the losing steer simply runs off to fight another day. These rituals are steeped in animist traditions and superstition, with special offerings and prayers made to the buffalo before the matches, and of course a huge amount of betting and boozing accompanying the fights.

WHERE TO STAY ON KO SAMUI

Thirty years ago there were but a few makeshift beachside bungalows along the nearly deserted coast of Samui. Today, luxury resorts stand shoulder to shoulder with upscale beach bungalows, all vying for supremacy. But whatever your budget, all enjoy virtually the same sand and views.

For more detailed information on each beach, check out "The Beaches," above. Below is a small accommodations selection from each area, including some of the best of the many new options. Listings follow a clockwise order around the island, beginning in the northwest corner.

Laem Yai

Four Seasons Samui ★★★ Located on a steep hillside in the extreme northwest of the island, this is not the place to go if you want to be in the thick of nightlife, but for anyone looking for a relaxing break, it is an ideal choice. All villas and suites enjoy expansive views out to sea, and guests have a choice of swimming at the beach (for resort guests only), in the lovely communal pool, or in their private infinity pool attached to each villa. Rooms are furnished in typically sumptuous Four Seasons style and are equipped with large, flatscreen TVs, Wi-Fi, and wine coolers. Buggies are on hand to run guests up and down the steep hill, and service is both personal and extremely efficient.

219 Moo 5, Angthong, Ko Samui 84140. ✆ **07724-3000.** Fax 07724-3002. www.fourseasons.com/kohsamui. 74 units. From 25,850B villa; from 81,600 1-bedroom villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; health club; outdoor pool; room service; spa; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Mae Nam Bay

Very Expensive

Napasai ★★★ A few years ago, Orient-Express Hotels took over this prize resort that nestles on a rocky headland leading to the white-sand Baan Tai beach at the western end of Mae Nam. A selection of rustic-themed teak cottages with high ceilings come with private pools, sumptuous decor, and large bathtubs, all with balconies. Though isolated, it is gorgeously self-contained. A top spa and good in-house dining make it a plum choice for well-heeled romantics.

65/10 Baan Tai, Maenam, Ko Samui 84330. ✆ **07742-9200.** Fax 07742-9201. www.napasai.com. 69 units. 8,859B–16,331B seaview/beachfront cottages; 16,754B–62,704B suites and 2- to 3-bed villas. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis courts; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Santiburi Resort ★ Santiburi was the first high-end property in the area. Modern state-of-the-art amenities are discreetly infused into the contemporary Thai architecture. The resort's top villas—with outside Jacuzzis—front the beach, while the others are set among lush greenery around a central pool and spa. Each bungalow comes with a large sunken tub. Guests can take advantage of windsurfing and sailing (free), and there is a sailing junk to tour surrounding islands (it's also used for supper cruises). Santiburi also hosts the island's top golf course, **Santiburi Golf,** near the resort.

Santiburi has a more affordable companion in nearby Bophut, called the **Bophut Resort and Spa** (✆ **07743-0201**), at a similar high standard, with 61 luxury seaside villas.

12/12 Moo 1, Tambol Mae Nam, Ko Samui 84330. ✆ **07742-5031.** Fax 07742-5040. www.santiburi.com. 71 units. From 19,000B deluxe suites; from 24,000B villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; golf course (nearby, connected by free shuttle); fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD player & library, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, stereo system.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Coco Palm Samui ★★ (Value) Under the swaying palms of peaceful Mae Nam beach, this bargain bungalow resort provides the fast-disappearing beach ambience that Samui was once famous for. Deluxe pool villas offer superb comfort; the bungalows are spotless and furnished with simple rattan and wooden decor. Food is remarkably good, and another plus is that Wi-Fi is available, albeit for a fee (you'll need to buy a card from

reception). The Lomprayah boat service to Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao conveniently leaves from the nearby pier.

26/4 Moo 4, Maenam Beach, Ko Samui 84330. ✆ **07724-7288.** Fax 07742-5321. www.cocopalmsamui.com. 90 units. From 1,600B standard cottages; from 3,500B beachfront cottages; from 6,500B pool villas. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; airport transfers; pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, minibar, TV.

Mae Nam Resort ★ (Value) These bungalows form a secluded little village in overgrown jungle gardens with tall, lush greenery. Each has teak paneling and floors, rattan furnishings, a small bathroom with polished stone walls, and a small deck. Beachfront bungalows will have you stepping off your balcony right into the silky, palm-shaded sand for very little, considering the neighboring Santiburi Resort's beachfront villas run about 30,000B. Okay, so Mae Nam Resort can't compare to five-star luxury, but it's still the same sand and view.

Mae Nam Beach, Ko Samui 84330 (next to the Santiburi Resort). ✆ **07724-7287.** Fax 07742-5116. www.maenamresort.com. 41 units. 1,200B bungalow with fan; 1,800B bungalow with A/C; 2,700B family room A/C bungalow. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; airport transfers; room service. *In room:* No phone.

Bophut Beach

Anantara Koh Samui ★★ This has to be one of Bophut's most popular hangouts; generous-size rooms have a modern feel and plenty of wood, and make use of exquisite local textiles. The resort provides such luxuries as yoga, Thai cooking classes, wine appreciation instruction, and superb spa therapies—while maintaining a low-key, unpretentious approach.

99/9 Bophut Bay, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07742-8300.** Fax 07742-8310. www.anantara.com. 82 units. 6,600B–8,400B deluxe double; 11,500B–14,500B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis court; watersports rental. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Bandara Resort Bandara has a range of villas, standard, and deluxe rooms that flank a main courtyard area, and a good-sized, raised pool. Seaside villas are luxurious, but the real wow factor is that some have private pools. A free-form pool is set at the beachside next to the restaurant. Water babies have complimentary use of watersports facilities such as the fleet of Hobie Cats. The vibe is slick and contemporary, with some nice Thai touches.

178/2 Moo 1, Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07724-5795.** Fax 07742-7340. www.bandararesort.com. 150 units. 5,000B–6,000B double superior/deluxe; from 10,000B pool villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Peace Resort (Kids) Living up to its name, this family-run resort offers five types of free-standing bungalows set in lush, peaceful gardens, the largest being 49 sq. m. (527 sq. ft.). All villas come with terraces and feature sunny yellow interiors and modern furnishings that have a rustic quality. Great for families, the large central pool has a separate kids' pool and a playground, but, when the place is busy, you'll have to rise early if you want to bag a sun bed.

178 Moo 1, Bo Phut Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (central Bophut). ✆ **07742-5357.** Fax 07742-5343. www.peaceresort.com. 102 units. 5,000B–11,000B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; kids' club; high-speed Internet; pool w/kids' pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, no phone.

Big Buddha Beach

The Saboey ★★ (Finds) This gorgeous little boutique resort oozes style with its sumptuous-hued interiors and unique Morocco-meets-Asia style. Rooms offer top-quality furnishings and useful added extras such as a writing desk and free Wi-Fi. Superior amenities such as DVD and CD players mark it out from the fray. The long, glassy infinity pool has ocean views and a wonderful Jacuzzi cascading down to the beach. Dine surrounded by candles and the sounds of waves at the beachside Breeze restaurant or try the **Quo Vadis** restaurant (see "Where to Dine in Ko Samui," later in this chapter).

51/4 Moo 4, Tambon Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07743-0450.** www.saboey.com. 20 units. 4,690B suites; 5,390B garden villas; 6,190B ocean villas; 6,790B–9,490B penthouse and beach villas. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; Jacuzzi; pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD player, minibar.

Laem Samrong

Six Senses Hideaway ★★★ Set on a gently sloping headland among 8 hectares (20 acres) of lush vegetation, this resort was proclaimed "Best in the World" by the prestigious Readers' Travel Awards doled out by *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2008. Those who voted for it were impressed by not only its lovely location and environmental friendliness, but also its sophisticated ambience and extensive leisure facilities. These facilities include private pools beside most villas and suites, a spa with a comprehensive range of treatments, and activities such as aquarobics, island tours, diving trips, and cooking classes. All the villas are equipped with every imaginable comfort and are attended by personal butlers, while the views are simply fabulous. The resort is in Laem Samrong, on the northeastern tip of Samui (just around the promontory that shelters Tongsai Bay).

9/10 Moo 5, Baan Plai Laem, Boput, Ko Samui 84320 (northeast tip of island). ✆ **07724-5678.** Fax 07724-5671. www.sixsenses.com. 66 units. 15,440B–20,640B villas; from 27,120B suites. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; gym; pool; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, Wi-Fi.

Tongsai Bay

The Tongsai Bay ★★★ Built like an amphitheater, and tripping down a hillside to its own beach, this former backpacker hideaway is now an all-suite complex with some very unique touches—such as its "Bath-with-a-View"—that set it apart. You'll get plenty of outdoor terrace space to enjoy the sea views; suites have outdoor bathtubs, and the Grand Tongsai Villas have gazebos for guests who like open-air sleeping. Tongsai Pool Villas have private plunge pools. There is a beautiful half-moon-shaped pool set in the gardens halfway down, and a large pool at the beach with a separate children's pool. The end result is casual outdoors ambience. The only drawback is the many steps between the hilltop reception area, bungalows, and beach.

84 Moo 5, Ban Plailaem, Bophut, Ko Samui 84320 (northeast tip of island). ✆ **07724-5480,** or 02381-8774 in Bangkok**.** Fax 07742-5462. Bangkok office. Fax 02381-8772. www.tongsaibay.co.th. 83 units. 11,000B–14,000B beachfront or cottage suite; 22,000B family cottage; from 22,000B grand villa; from 25,000B pool villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; airport transfers; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis court; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Choeng Mon Bay

The Imperial Boathouse ★★ When it opened a long while ago, the Boathouse was lauded for its originality. Even today, the concept is pretty unique: 34 authentic teak, dry-docked rice barges converted into charming free-standing suites. The less-expensive rooms in the three-story buildings are fine but not nearly as atmospheric. Hotel facilities

are extensive, and if you can't get a boat suite, you can swim in their boat-shaped swimming pool.

83 Moo 5, Choeng Mon Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (southern part of beach). ✆ **07742-5041.** Fax 07742-5460. www.imperialboathouse.com. 210 units. 6,500B–7,200B double; 8,500B boat suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Sala Samui ★★★ Hip, slick, and cool; that's the vibe at Sala Samui. Stylish rooms, most with their own private pools, have views onto private courtyards or the sea. The place has a boutique feel, blending traditional Thai architecture with modern facilities and amenities. Polished concrete is accented in Thai silk hangings and canopy beds. With its in-house Mandara spa waiting to pamper guests, this is a real honeymooners' haven.

10/9 Moo 5, Baan Plai Lam Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07724-5888.** Fax 07724-5889. www.salasamui.com. 69 units. 8,600B deluxe; 12,900B–24,950B pool villa; 32,650B presidential villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; spa; room service; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

White House Beach Resort & Spa ★★ This resort in the graceful Khmer style, built around a central garden with a lotus pond and swimming pool, is a good choice in Choeng Mon for comfort at reasonable cost. The lobby is impeccably decorated with original Thai and Khmer artwork. The spacious and elegant rooms flank a central walkway that's lined with orchids. Each house accommodates four spacious rooms, which have separate sitting areas, huge beds, fine furnishings, and large bathrooms. By the beach, there's a pool with a bar and an especially graceful teak *sala.* The resort's quality Swiss management team is very efficient and assures a pleasant stay. This is top comfort spilling onto a beautiful stretch of white-sand beach.

59/3 Moo 5, Choeng Mon Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07724-7921.** Fax 07724-5318. www.samuithewhitehouse.com. 40 units. From 5,000 double; from 6,200B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** restaurant; bar; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Chaweng & Chaweng Noi Bays

Very Expensive

The Briza Beach Resort & Spa ★★★ One of the most atmospheric resorts on Samui, the Briza offers a pure lifestyle experience, aiming to recapture the spirit and serenity of the Srivijaya Empire, a historic Buddhism-inspired period. You'll almost feel the tranquillity as you mount the majestic entrance steps. Just steps away from north Chaweng beach, the accommodations range from pool-access villas to beachfront villas with large private pools. All villas are supersize, with a bathtub and a separate shower; fine furnishings reflect the grandeur and serenity of the resort's theme. Guests are treated to exclusive perks, such as a private butler, who endeavors to satisfy guests' every whim, and lessons on Thai culture are on offer.

173/22 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach, Tambon Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07723-1997.** Fax 07723-1990. www.thebriza.com. 57 units. 13,500B–17,500B pool villas; 19,000B beachfront villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Pool; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Centara Grand Beach Resort ★★ Recently, this sprawling resort (formerly Samui Central Beach Resort) right in the heart of Chaweng was totally remodeled with extravagant new rooms (including Deluxe Pool Suites) and a Club Lounge open to pool villa guests, and it also sports a whole spanking-new luxury feel. Happily, though, for its many returning guests, Centara won't have lost any of its well-loved village ambience; and its

plethora of dining options will still include Brazilian fare at **Zico's,** across the road (see "Where to Dine in Ko Samui," later), and **Hagi,** for Japanese food. If anything has changed, it's that Centara offers even more peace and seclusion from the rampant development around this busy strip. Off-season discounts make the resort a very reasonable choice considering the quality.

38/2 Moo 3, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07723-0500.** Fax 07742-2385. www.centarahotelsresorts.com. 203 units. From 10,000B double; from 19,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 2 bars; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool and children's pool; room service; spa; tennis courts; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Kandaburi Resort & Spa ★★★ This upscale low-rise resort is part of the Kata Group and sits right on the north Chaweng seafront, among tropical vegetation and lotus ponds. Rooms are decorated in a pleasant modern Thai style and there's Mediterranean, Thai, and all manner of grilled goodies (as well as a fun food court) when hunger takes hold. In high season, enjoy dance shows and a live band in the evenings. An on-site Dive Academy assists those seeking pelagic pleasures by day, including fishing trips.

20 Moo 2, Chaweng, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07742-8888.** Fax 07742-8899. www.katagroup.com. 183 units. 9,852B deluxe; 11,227B premium; 21,960B honeymoon suite; 29,082B family suite. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 3 bars; fitness center; high-speed Internet; 2 pools; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar.

The Library ★★★ This ravishingly minimalist resort offers a startlingly different contemporary slant. Designed by a Bangkok architect, its rooms are divided into studios and suites, and in keeping with the hotel's name, the resort's main feature is a library featuring an array of books and DVDs. State-of-the-art rooms (with Jacuzzis and rain showers) provide an extraordinary range of luxuries, from huge plasma TVs and iPods, to light boxes and self-controlled colored lighting. It's cool, it's original, and it appeals to those with a leaning toward techno-Zen. The red-tiled pool, while innovative, somehow brings to mind Agatha Christie.

14/1 Moo 2, Bophut, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07742-2767.** Fax 07742-2344. www.thelibrary.name. 13 units. 14,000B studio; 16,000B suites. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness room; pool. *In room:* A/C; satellite TV, DVD, iMac.

Expensive

Amari Palm Reef Resort ★★★ Kids This fine-looking Amari hotel is both a fun family choice and a honeymooner's delight, with sea-facing suite rooms that merge slick-contemporary with traditional-Thai decor. Older accommodations in the main block are not as luxurious. A newer block of midrange units lies in a small "village" location across the road from the beach and with a separate pool. The central beachside pool area is appealing, as is the dining terrace overlooking it. The resort is far enough from Chaweng strip to be quiet and comfortable (but close enough to party). Though it's a short walk to get to a less rocky beach, the beach is beautiful. Sybarites will adore the superb spa here, and everyone should like **Prego,** where the Milanese chef's Italian dishes are so popular that reservations are recommended.

Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (north end of the main strip). ✆ **07742-2015.** Fax 07742-2394. www.amari.com/palmreef. 187 units. 8,326B superior; 10,992B deluxe; 17,520B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; babysitting; bike rental; kids' club; fitness center; Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor pools; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Coral Bay Resort ★ North of giddy Chaweng, but close enough to commute, these upscale thatched bungalows sit atop a picturesque hill. Rooms line the hillside (you have

to trudge a bit to get to some), and each has a large balcony (some are shared with adjoining rooms). Bathrooms are set in small gardens with waterfall showers and delightful stonework. At the side of the resort is a private villa with two master bedrooms and its own pool. The central pool area is high above the rock and coral beach below (not good for swimming), and the bay offers good snorkeling and fishing. Guests can dine at the Pakarang restaurant, and a small spa provides affordable treatments.

9 Moo 2, Bophut, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (on a hill crest, at the north end of Chaweng). ✆ **07742-2223.** Fax 07742-2392. www.coralbay.net. 56 units. 6,850B–9,500B double bungalow; 8,750B–16,200B family units/suites; 20,000B–32,000B Baan Chomjan villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; kids' club; pool; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, minibar.

Poppies Samui Resort At the southern end of busy Chaweng, this popular old-timer, unlike the concrete behemoths around this part of town, features just two dozen luxury cottages nestled among lush foliage, with paths and wooden bridges crossing over streams and cascading waterfalls. The Balinese-style cottages have unique open-air bathrooms with sunken bathtubs and marble floors, set in private gardens. Unwind at the Body Care Spa, in a *sala* by the central free-form pool, which is surrounded by natural boulders. The Ayutthaya-style wooden pavilion is home to the resort's well-loved restaurant, known for years as one of Samui's finest (see "Where to Dine in Ko Samui," below). Given its top service and amenities, this place books up quickly—reserve in advance.

P.O. Box 1, Chaweng, Ko Samui 84320 (on the south end of the Chaweng strip). ✆ **07742-2419.** Fax 07742-2420. www.poppiessamui.com. 24 units. 8,750B–13,750B double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Moderate

Ark Bar Garden Beach Resort Ark Bar is a good choice for party people. Its two-story hotel rooms may have been squeezed into a narrow strip of gardens leading to the beach right in the heart of Chaweng, but it's got the basics (and even a small pool). The restaurant, serving Western and Thai food and fresh seafood, is popular, with both indoor and beachside dining facilities that feature cozy tables with Thai cushions and service by an ultrafriendly staff. As the sun goes down, Ark Bar becomes one of the main focal areas on Chaweng beach to gather at nighttime. On Wednesdays, from 2pm until 1am, bikini-clad tourists and locals alike join in the fun, when some of the island's best funk and house music DJs perform.

159/75 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆/fax **07742-2047.** www.ark-bar.com. 60 units. 2,000B superior/garden rooms; 2,800B junior suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Evergreen Resort A dying breed of unfussy accommodations in the heart of Chaweng, Evergreen sits on a quieter spot not far from the beach. This is one of very few Chaweng pads that still offer a midrange option in the form of smart rooms and villas; the junior suite here provides a touch of luxury with an open-air bathtub on the terrace.

167/32 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07741-3017.** Fax 07741-3018. www.evergreensamui.com. 32 units. From 2,270B superior; from 2,600B deluxe villa; from 4,050B junior suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Airport transfer. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, no phone.

Tradewinds ★★ One of the earliest hotels in Chaweng, Tradewinds is a good midrange choice to this day, though the original bungalows are beginning to show their age. A newer motel-style block is now available at the back, which has smarter rooms but no beach views. From the higher-priced bungalows, you can step right off your front porch

into the powder-soft sand, while standard bungalows are in a secluded garden not far from the beach. Rooms have large beds and rattan furnishings, large bathrooms, and terraces big enough for barbecues. The hotel is also home to Samui's catamaran sailing center, and can arrange kayaking, snorkeling, and diving trips.

17/14 Moo 3, Chaweng Beach, Ko Samui 84320. ✆ **07741-4294.** Fax 07741-4293. www.tradewinds-samui.com. 30 units. 2,500B garden cottage; 3,000B seaview cottage/superior rooms. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Lamai Bay

Very Expensive

Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort ★★★ Lots of hotels on Samui describe themselves as "boutique," but the term is apt in this instance. Boasting grand-scale style with top service, the Pavilion offers everything from Mediterranean-themed bungalows to luxurious honeymoon suites. Most feature private pools or huge, opulent bathrooms, plus a courtyard area where guests can enjoy a Jacuzzi and shower under the stars. They also have a fine spa; a small pool and dining pavilion are on the beach. Proximity to Lamai's nightlife is a plus for night owls.

124/24 Moo 3, Lamai Beach, Ko Samui 84310 (north end of Lamai Beach). ✆ **07742-4030.** Fax 07742-4029. www.pavilionsamui.com. 70 units. 12,000B superior spa room; 14,000B junior suite; 20,000B hydro villa; 30,000B grand pool villa; 35,000B beachfront grand pool villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; outdoor pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, CD/DVD player, hair dryer, minibar.

Expensive

Rocky's Boutique Resort ★★★ Rocky's pushes the boundaries of luxury with two beautiful pools and individually designed one- to four-bedroom villas, which cascade down a rocky hillside to a private sandy beach. Just 5 minutes north of Lamai, it's easily accessible—but a hard slog up steep hills for villa residents. The resort boasts a one-to-one staff/guest ratio and great views from the private villa terraces. The hotel longtail boat can whisk you to the Marine Park or secluded beaches (for a price).

438/1 Moo 1, Lamai, Tambon Maret, Ko Samui 84310. ✆ **07741-8367.** Fax 07741-8366. www.rocky resort.com. 34 units. 5,000B gardenview suite; 7,000B oceanview suite; 9,500B beachfront suite; 15,000B deluxe villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** restaurant; bar; babysitting; bikes; 2 pools; Wi-Fi; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C in some, satellite TV, CD player.

Moderate

Mango Village ★ Mango Village comprises somewhat cramped and characterless concrete cottages with blindingly bright red-tile roofs and petite front porches. The garden rooms, set around a palm-fringed pool, are adequate, clean, and well-equipped for the price, but the decor lacks any charm—great if you like '70s kitsch: sunflower yellow walls and purple floral bedspreads. A better bet here is one of the beachfront or family rooms, where the decor is not so garish. All rooms are set in a tropical garden, on a slope leading to what the resort claims is a private beach, just south of the "Grandfather and Grandmother Rocks." Reception service after hours, or on weekends, can be somewhat haphazard—but hey, you're on holiday! Simple Italian fare can be found at the resort restaurant.

438/2 Moo 1, Lamai, Tambon Maret, Ko Samui 84310. ✆ **07741-8958.** Fax 07723-2237. www.mango villagesamui.com. 24 units. From 2,700B garden bungalows; 3,000B beachfront double; 3,900B family room. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; Jacuzzi; pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Spa Samui ★★ (Value) This family-operated wellness retreat has been around for years and is known for its fasting and cleansing programs as well as great vegetarian/raw food and yoga and meditation courses. There are two resorts on Samui: the original **Spa**

Beach, comprising a laid-back cluster of rustic bungalows and a pool just north of Lamai, and the newer **Spa Village,** a hillside retreat studded with amazing rock formations. Rooms at both locations range from simple bungalows to large private suites with large balconies. (All rooms are equipped for colonics.) Spa Village has a pool, herbal steam bath in a large stone grotto, massage, body wraps, and facial treatments—and is open to day visitors (see "Where to Dine in Ko Samui," below).

Spa Village: Lamai Beach, Ko Samui 84320 (just south, in the hills over Lamai Beach). ✆ **07723-0855.** Fax 07742-4126. www.spasamui.com. 39 units. 900B–3,500B double. MC, V. Spa Beach: Lamai Beach (on the north end of the main strip in Lamai). 24 units. 1,000B–1,200B. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; juice bar; pool; sauna; spa. *In room:* A/C, fridge, minibar.

Weekender Resort and Spa (Value) This resort offers many accommodation options at a very reasonable price, from bungalows, superior, and deluxe rooms spread across three separate buildings to Thai-style houses. Plus, there are lower rates for singles, appealing to solo travelers who don't want to pay for twin occupancy. The teak-floored rooms are spread over a large area of beautiful landscaped tropical gardens. It's right on the soft white-sand beach of southern Lamai (with great swimming), but—just as important—it's also near enough to town.

124/19 Moo 3, Lamai, Ko Samui 84310. ✆ **07742-4429.** Fax 07742-4011. www.weekender-samui.com. 133 units. 1,800B bungalows; 2,000B standard room; 2,600B Thai house; 3,100B superior; 4,200B deluxe; 13,500 sunrise suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; juice bar; pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

Lamai Wanta Located in the center of Lamai Beach, this little complex of clean and contemporary cottages complements a cluster of rooms in a two-story hotel block. There is little in the way of service here, but the small seaside pool is an oasis, and you are close to town for services. Tidy rooms have balconies, terra-cotta tiles, and high ceilings. Rooms in the two-story block are a good value, but are also within earshot of local bars, which can get noisy; pack your earplugs.

124/264 Moo 3, Lamai, Ko Samui 84310 (north end of Lamai Beach). ✆ **07742-4550.** Fax 07742-4218. http://lamaiwanta.com. 68 units. 1,800B basic room; 2,000B deluxe; 3,200B–4,400B bungalows. MC, V. **Amenities:** Pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, minibar.

Orchid Suites (Value) This wonderful and informal family resort is made up of very simple thatched cottages with teak floors. These are hidden in beautiful tropical gardens in the middle of Lamai Beach; a free shuttle bus runs here from Chaweng and Samui Yacht Club. Simple rattan furnishings are quite adequate, and the balconies are large and airy, with sea or pool views. The flat rate is an excellent value, though a high-season surcharge applies as in many places. The large pool with a poolside bar looks out over Lamai Bay.

129/11 Moo 3, Lamai Beach, Ko Samui 84310. ✆ **07723-2304.** Fax 07723-2305. www.orchidsuite.com. 20 units. 1,700B–1,900B garden/seaview. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV.

West Coast

Very Expensive

Baan Taling Ngam Resort and Spa ★★★ On the western side of the island some 40 minutes' drive from Samui Airport—and overlooking the ocean—this is one of the ritziest addresses on Samui. The deluxe guest rooms, beach villas, and deluxe suites all have outstanding Thai-style furniture, exquisite textiles, and pretty louvered doors leading to the terraces. The Cliff Villas and the Royal Villa Baan Napa offer sumptuous

Thai interiors and large private patios. The hilltop lobby and restaurant, as well as the guest rooms, have fantastic views of the sea and resort gardens, and the main pool (one of seven) appears to spill over its edges into the coconut palm grove below. The beach is small, and it's quite a schlep from the action at Chaweng (a 30-min. drive away)—for some, this is the resort's real draw. With great dining opportunities and a spa to soothe away those blues, this is an all-around superb place to really get away.

295 Moo 3, Taling Ngam Beach, Ko Samui 84140. ✆ **07742-9100.** Fax 07742-3220. www.baan-taling-ngam.com. 70 units. 9,400B–10,200B deluxe room; 17,600B suite; 13,800B–27,000B villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; dive center; fitness center; 7 pools; spa; room service; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, CD/DVD player, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Lipa Lodge Resort Situated on the quiet west coast, this small resort is hard to beat, if you're looking for an affordable and tranquil escape. In business for over 35 years, the owners have learned the art of giving personal attention; and with just 11 bungalows, there's no chance of it getting crowded. As the resort was founded by an award-winning chef, you can look forward to great tastes in the restaurant, and the infinity pool is just the spot to watch a spectacular sunset. Bungalows are comfortable and well equipped, and each has a private balcony.

75/4 Moo 3, Tambon Lipa Noi, Ko Samui 81410. ✆ **07748-6167.** www.lipalodgeresort.com. 11 units. 3,000B–4,900B double; 5,800B family bungalow. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; infinity pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE IN KO SAMUI

Chaweng

Chaweng is lined with eateries, with everything from McDonald's to the finest dining (the best of which are below). Increasingly, larger resorts in the area are setting up free-standing restaurants for both in-house and outside guests. **Poppies** (✆ **07742-2419**), on South Chaweng, is famous for its beachside dining, Balinese fare, and romantic atmosphere, and brings in guest chefs from around the world. Reservations are recommended. Look out also for the highly recommended **Red Snapper** (at the Chaweng Regent; www.redsnapperbar andgrill.com), **Prego** (from Amari), and **Zico's,** from Centara (listed below).

In addition to the places reviewed below, also try to check out the branches of **Will Wait,** in Chaweng and Lamai, where you get a hearty breakfast in town at a decent price. And don't miss the impressive **Dr Frog's** (✆ **07741-3797**), which sits on the hill between Chaweng and Lamai and is becoming very popular for its tasty Thai and Western food, free Wi-Fi, and spectacular views over the bay.

Bear in mind that if you use any credit cards on Samui, your payments are often surcharged up to 5%.

Betelnut ★★ INTERNATIONAL California cuisine, anyone? At this innovative restaurant, you'll be greeted by Jeffrey Lord, owner, proprietor, and rollicking raconteur who delivers fine wit and witticisms along with excellent victuals. The menu runs the gamut from marinated slow-cooked pork belly to clam chowder with green curry. I had a delicious sesame-encrusted salmon katsu, indicative of the international fare here. The seared tuna with salsa and the soft-shell crabs with green papaya and mango salad are also good choices. Come with friends, order a spread of dishes, and pick from among the fine wine selections for a great evening. If you're having difficulty choosing from all the appetizing alternatives, go for the five-course tasting menu, which will set you back around 1,800B.

11/2 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach (in the Buri Rasa Resort). ✆ **07723-0222.** www.betelnutsamui.net. Main courses 475B–1,200B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm.

Noori India INDIAN This long-running family business owns two restaurants in Chaweng. Noori serves a variety of true Indian dishes, offering an alternative to those for whom Thai spices may be a wee bit too piquant. Although a spot of redecorating wouldn't go amiss, the music and decor of traditional Indian artworks makes for a truly authentic experience. They also run an islandwide delivery service (free in the Chaweng area).

Opposite Chaweng Buri on Central Chaweng Strip; a second location is just before Poppies Resort. ✆ **07741-3315** for reservations at either outlet. Main courses from 200B. No credit cards. Daily 11am–11:30pm.

Vecchia Napoli ★ ITALIAN The simple and authentic Northern Italian cuisine at this restaurant fits the bill for great pastas, grills, pizza, and the house special, shellfish soup. Follow it up with a tiramisu and espresso, and you won't believe you're just a stone's throw from busy Chaweng. Also ask about their upmarket venue, **Bellini** (46/26 Chaweng Beach, Soi Calibri; ✆ **07741-3831;** www.bellinisamui.com), serving up similar Italian delights. Chow down on grilled vegetables with goat cheese or cannelloni crepe with rock lobster.

166/31 Moo 2, Chaweng Beach (central Chaweng). ✆ **07723-1229.** Main courses 200B–580B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Zico's ★★ BRAZILIAN For a wild night out, this unique Brazilian-themed restaurant (part of the Centara Resort) is a riot of music, drink, and dance, with Brazilian performers shaking their tail feathers from table to table. Roving waiters, called *passadors,* come around with massive skewers of meat and trays of delicacies (you can also choose from the extensive salad bar). For a set price, you pick what you like, and as much as you like, by laying a small coin on the table with the green side up for "More please," and the red side up for "Enough for now." It's quite an experience.

38/2 Moo 3, Chaweng Beach (on the south end of Chaweng across from the Centara Resort). ✆ **07723-0500.** 790B for an unlimited buffet. MC, V. Daily 6:30–10:30pm. Dance shows at 8, 9, and 10pm.

Fisherman's Village

You should take time out to wander through the Fisherman's Village area, just off the busy road to Bophut's beach and piers. Now transformed into a foodie paradise, it is lined with several atmospheric pubs and small upmarket restaurants along the water's edge. You can savor good pub food in the friendly and laid-back **Frog and Gecko** (✆ **07742-5248**), or, if it's stylish dining you're after, pop into **Starfish and Coffee** (✆ **07742-7201**), in the center of the street. Vegetarians will adore the friendly, laid-back ambience at **Art Café** (✆ **089724-9673,** mobile), which dishes up healthy breakfasts, coffees, or light meals such as King Fish Pesto Sauce salad or the Special Tofu salad with curry dressing. You can also join yoga and art classes here; just ask at the counter.

The Pier ★★ Finds FRENCH/INTERNATIONAL This well-known—and well-promoted—fine French restaurant sits in Fisherman's Village overlooking the sea; it used to be named The Mangrove. Famous not only for its food but also for its romantic atmosphere, this place is run by an experienced Franco-Belgian couple who go to great lengths to please all palates; the menu offers monthly specials to cater to the oft-returning expatriate clientele. For a starter, try the crab salad, followed by roasted salmon with lime

butter sauce, or the delectable seared tuna. Don't scrimp on dessert: Try the rich chocolate mousse or crème brûlée.

50 Moo 1, Tambon Bophut. ✆ **07743-0681.** Main courses 250B–750B. MC, V. Daily 11am–midnight.

Big Buddha

Quo Vadis ★ MEDITERRANEAN/ASIAN Don't be put off if the service staff is not so fluent in English here—the cuisine created in this new "Mediter-Asian" restaurant makes a great change from the usual beach diners. As well as the Mediterranean/Asian fusion meals, there's a mouthwatering selection of tapas, too. Many dishes, reflecting the design of Saboey Resort, are Moroccan in flavor and arrive (as one would expect) in the Arab *tajine,* a traditional clay pot, along with amazing couscous.

51/4 Moo 4, Tambon Bophut. ✆ **07743-0450.** www.saboey.com. Meals from 400B. MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Lamai

The Spa Restaurant ★★ VEGETARIAN It's not just for veggies (they serve a few seafood and chicken dishes as well) but for anyone who'd like to get away from Big Macs and enjoy a healthy, tasty dish made almost entirely from organic fare. Open from breakfast time for its house guests, the Spa serves yummy smoothies, Mexican snacks, steamed snapper, an amazing variety of great tofu dishes (the tofu burgers are huge), and delicious curries—along with excellent Thai fare. If you can, plan to arrive a few hours in advance to take advantage of the herbal steam and massage facilities at the Health Center here. Try either their new mountaintop retreat or the older resort just north of Lamai.

Rte. 4169, btw. Chaweng and Lamai beaches. ✆ **07723-0855.** Reservations recommended in peak season. Main courses 40B–250B. MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

West Coast

Big John Seafood SEAFOOD This is worth the ride across the island—to Lipa Noi—especially if you like fresh seafood. Although the atmosphere is a mix of raucous revelry and Thai families out to graze, this has become a longtime popular spot, with live music most nights. Order the day's catch as you like, and accompany it with a myriad of good Thai curries and side dishes. Big John overlooks a pretty stretch of palm-lined beach.

95/4 Moo 2, Lipa Noi Beach. ✆ **07741-5537.** www.bigjohnsamui.com. Seafood priced by kg. No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

EXPLORING KO SAMUI

Scuba & Snorkeling

Local dive shops can offer advice on sites around Samui, and, more important, know local prevailing conditions (the open water around Samui can be notoriously squally). Many shops are attached to PADI dive schools offering trips ranging farther afield to some of the 80 or so islands scattered across this archipelago. **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (with 40 islands) makes a great destination from Samui, for either diving or a day's sightseeing. The few shops listed below are good options among the many on the island. ***Note:*** There is a **decompression chamber** on Samui; call ✆ **07742-7427** for info.

Samui International Diving School (at the Malibu Resort, Chaweng Beach; ✆ **07741-3050;** www.planet-scuba.net) is a good bet for full services. **Easy Divers,** open

since 1987, has locations in Chaweng (✆ **07741-3373;** www.easydivers-thailand.com) and at other beaches, and offers good deals for beginners. Both outfits offer all sorts of PADI courses and daily dive tours, and have international safety standard boats, good equipment, and complete insurance packages. Daily dives (two dives per day) start from about 4,000B per person including land transportation, breakfast, equipment, lunch, and drinks.

Big Blue (✆ **07745-6179;** www.bigbluediving.com), based on Ko Tao, provides trips for divers of any skill level and is a good choice for small groups or those seeking private attention.

Some of the better **snorkeling** off Ko Samui is found along the rocky coast between Chaweng Noi and Lamai bays. Several shops along Chaweng Beach rent snorkeling gear for about 200B per day.

Golf

Samui boasts the picturesque hilltop Santiburi Golf Course, part of the Santiburi Resort (12/12 Moo 1, Mae Nam; ✆ **07742-1700;** www.santiburi.com). It sits high in the hills on the north end of the island. Greens fees start from 4,350B for 18 holes, including caddy and golf buggy fees. Opposite the turnoff to Fisherman's Village, the **Bo Phut Hills Golf Club** (✆ **087267-1042,** mobile) offers a more affordable option for golfers on a 9-hole course and costs 1,475B (including club rental and caddy), or 2,400B if played as 18 holes. If you feel that you haven't gotten the swing just yet, the new game of **football golf** needs no special skills, or even clubs; it's as it sounds, a matter of kicking a football into the holes. Just north of Chaweng, in Choeng Mon, the course at **Samui Football Golf** (✆ **07724-8084;** www.samuifootballgolf.com) is set under swaying palms.

Kayaking

Blue Stars Sea Kayaking at 169/1 Moo 2, in Chaweng (✆ **07741-3231;** www.bluestars.info) takes people kayaking and snorkeling to the Marine National Park at 2,200B for adults, 1,400B for children. The rubber canoes are perfect for exploring the caverns underneath limestone cliffs. If you can't get to Phang Nga (which has the most fantastic sea cave scenery), this trip is another fun option. Alternatively, try **Samui Island Tour** (✆ **07742-1382;** www.samuiislandtour.com).

Cruising, Sailing & Kiteboarding

Short cruises can be taken on a stunning **Chinese junk,** *The Fortune* (✆ **07796-0340;** www.jonque-fortune.com), which operates from Fisherman's Village, on Boput Beach, accommodates up to 10 people (or wedding parties), and offers trips from a day to a week. Onboard activities include diving, snorkeling, fishing, and island trekking. **Easy Charter** (✆ **07724-6280;** www.easy-charters.com) has a traditional Indonesian **wooden ketch,** *Kaisso Kaia,* for sunset and day (or longer) luxury cruising.

For **catamaran sailing,** check out **Tradewinds Resort,** in Chaweng (✆ **07723-0602;** www.sailingkohsamui.com). Owner and longtime resident John Stall offers—and leads—courses. There's now a growing bunch of **kiteboarders** descending on Samui in the peak season (Dec–Feb); more information can be found on such sites as **www.kiteboardingasia.com.** A center is based out of Samui Orchid Resort, on Laem Set Beach (www.samuiorchid.com), in the island's southeast.

CULTURAL PURSUITS

Cooking Courses

For daily Thai cooking and fruit-carving lessons, try **Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts** (**SITCA; ✆ 07741-3172;** www.sitca.net), which is a professional operation with a friendly cooking school; it's a great way to have fun and meet others—especially if your beach plans get rained out. After the course, you can invite a guest to dine with you at a group meal. Classes meet daily at 11am and 4pm and cost 1,950B; they accept all major credit cards. Call for more details, or pop into the Institute on the Chaweng Beach strip, across from the Centara Grand Beach Resort (p. 201).

Spas

Like many places in Thailand, the spa scene has really taken off on Samui. All the big, international five-star resorts, such as **Anantara** (p. 177), offer top-range (and top-priced) treatments by well-trained staff. But there are also some reasonably priced haunts too, including a number of good day spas for those wanting a serious and dedicated wellness retreat. Whether as an escape from the kids on a rainy day or as part of a larger health-focused mission, Samui has all the services you'll need.

Ban Sabai, on Big Buddha Beach (**✆ 07724-5175;** www.ban-sabai.com), has a wide range of therapies that take place in one of two teak Thai houses or in a *sala* at the beach side. Personal attention is the hallmark in this little Garden of Eden. Two houses are available for booking as part of a package or simply as a relaxing accommodation. Treatments start around 1,200B for an hour's facial massage.

Eranda Herbal Spa ★, just north of Chaweng, on the road to Choeng Mon (**✆ 07742-2666;** www.erandaspa.com), is set in tropical gardens with plunge pools, steam rooms, and Jacuzzis on a high perch above Chaweng Bay—so you get sea views while getting pampered. Choose from an open communal *sala* or luxury private pavilions with their own steam rooms and Jacuzzis.

The highly respected day spa **Tamarind Springs** ★★ (**✆ 07723-0571;** www.tamarindsprings.com) is set on a palm-clad hillside just above the beach at Lamai and is a rare place that truly takes you back to nature. The natural herbal steam room sandwiched between huge, smooth boulders is awesome; after a few minutes, you'll savor slipping into the outdoor plunge pool. Book well in advance.

Traditional massage is available at any number of storefronts in Chaweng and along the beach. Expect to pay between 200B and 400B per hour for services; it's much the same as the average spa, but without the pomp, ceremony, or incense.

Another gem is **Natural Wing Health Spa & Resort** (**✆ 07742-0871;** www.naturalwing.com), on Bang Por Beach (near the Four Seasons Resort), a spa resort with rooms from 1,800B and villas for 2,200B; wellness holiday packages are also available. Prices include daily breakfast and detox (cleansing) and slimming programs, in conjunction with acupuncture and a variety of spa treatments. Natural Wing also has a small restaurant offering Thai and Vietnamese cuisine.

SHOPPING

There is very little in terms of local craft production on the island—almost everything is imported from the mainland—so save the big purchases for Bangkok or Chiang Mai. New shopping areas are growing in number by the day, however, around Chaweng. **Pearls** are cultivated locally, and you'll see some good examples in several shops. Ask local tour operators about trips to **Naga Pearl Farm,** on **Ko Matsum.**

KO SAMUI AFTER DARK

At any given time, the Chaweng strip is certain to be disrupted occasionally by roaming pickup trucks with crackling PA systems blaring out advertisements in Thai and English for local **Thai boxing bouts.** Grab a flyer for times and locations, which vary.

Many of Samui's hotels and resorts have cultural shows featuring Thai dance that can be magical. If you like sequins and glamour, Samui puts on some entertaining *katoey* (drag queen) shows as well. **Christy's Cabaret** (✆ **08167-62181**) at the north end of Chaweng puts on a gala extravaganza of high camp that's free of charge. Come well before the show starts at 10pm to get a good seat, and be prepared to make up for the free admission with a purchase of a cocktail.

For bars and discos, Chaweng is the place to be. There are classier clubs, such as **Mint Bar,** in Soi Green Mango, which hosts international DJs in a stylish setting, and the fashionable **Q Bar** up on the hill, a little remote from the main center. **Solo Bar,** on the beachfront road in the center of Chaweng (next to Starbucks), throws the best party Samui has to offer every Friday from 2pm to 1am, with free barbecue. Because it has DJs spinning great sounds, a pool table, and six plasma TV screens showing major sporting events, people tend to gather at Solo early before going on a walkabout, reconvening later at **Solo Club** just behind (part of the same enterprise), which stays open till dawn.

A somewhat dubious legend among a certain crowd in Chaweng is the nearby **Green Mango,** which bangs out cheesy house music while commercial sex workers cruise for foreign business. **Just Jonno's** (✆ **08578-99451**) is a bar/diner at the entrance of Sala Samui Resort in Choeng Mon that provides a refreshing alternative to Chaweng bars. Appealing less to grungy barflies and more to yuppies, it fills a much needed gap in this isolated corner. It plays cool house music in the evenings and offers a free Full Moon BBQ with English-style beef burgers cooked by Jonno himself.

For **live music** on Chaweng, go no farther than **Beatles' Bar,** in Fisherman's Village, which sees gatherings of local expat musicians, or **Coco Blues Company,** on Chaweng Beach Road, a popular blues club–cum–restaurant with New Orleans–style atmosphere. Irish-owned/managed **Tropical Murphy's,** across from McDonald's in south Chaweng (✆ **07741-3614**), is a slice of Ireland, with an authentic pub atmosphere, a full range of beers, and good tasty British grub. Live music on the second floor boosts the ambience but doesn't hinder conversation.

On Sunday afternoons, be sure to truck on over to the **Secret Garden Pub** ★★, on Big Buddha Beach (✆ **07724-5253**), for barbecue food, cheap beer, and a succession of local and guest musicians performing blues and rock songs. The crowd is more or less evenly split between tourists and expats, and it's all very relaxed and family friendly. There are also accommodations available at the attached bungalows.

Over at Lamai Beach, there's everything from beer bars of the sleazier variety to mud wrestling, lady Thai boxing, and a few decent music venues. **Fusion** breaks the mold with acid jazz, funk, soul, and drum 'n' bass nights; and down at **Sub Club,** decent DJs, a good drink selection, and professional dancers (not go-go girls) whip the crowd up into a frenzy till the small hours. Sports fans may be impressed by the gigantic screen that looms over the beer garden here. **Bauhaus** has cheap drinks and holds foam parties and attracts football fans to its screens in high season.

Ang Thong National Marine Park ★★

Ang Thong National Marine Park comprises over 40 more islands northwest of Samui and is well known for its scenic beauty and coral reefs. Many of these islands are limestone rock towers of up to 40m (131 ft.), fringed by beaches and tropical rainforest.

Ko Wua Talab (Sleeping Cow Island) is the largest of the 40 and is home to the **National Park Headquarters,** where there are some very basic four- to eight-person accommodations (book through the park headquarters at ✆ **07728-6025,** or online at www.dnp.go.th), but most just visit for the day. The island has freshwater springs and a park-run restaurant. ***Note:*** Pack a pair of strong walking shoes for the steep hills; flip-flops won't be able to take the gradient.

Ko Mae Ko (Mother Island) is known for both its beach and Talay Noi, an **inland saltwater lake** with a hidden outlet to the sea (the inspiration behind the film *The Beach*). Known to the Thais as **Ang Thong,** or "Golden Bowl," this turquoise-green lagoon gave its name to the entire archipelago. Endless companies offer day trips by speedboat. Some include snorkeling and kayaking trips with a range of prices; **Blue Stars** (✆ **07741-3231;** www.bluestars.info), in Chaweng, is a good operator to try.

5 KO PHA NGAN ★

644km (400 miles) S of Bangkok to Surat Thani; 75km (47 miles) NE from Surat Thani to Ko Pha Ngan

Ko Pha Ngan is a more rustic alternative to busy and developed Ko Samui, attracting many backpackers in search of that well-used cliché, "island paradise." However, although Ko Pha Ngan still attracts an adventurous young crowd, it is following the same model of development as Samui and Phuket—once-basic bungalow resorts are turning into upmarket villas with air-conditioning and swimming pools. This, in turn, is forcing prices to increase.

Easily visible from Ko Samui but about two-thirds its size, with similar terrain and flora, Ko Pha Ngan boasts beautiful beaches and some secluded upmarket resorts on the farther reaches of the island—the rugged north and west coast areas are accessible only by bumpy road, or chartered boat. The southeastern peninsula of **Had Rin** (also written Haad Rin) is home to the now-infamous monthly **Full Moon Party,** a night-long beach rave that attracts thousands of revelers who pack the island to groove to every kind of dance music—and consume (and usually later regurgitate) buckets of alcohol. For those who can't make it for Full Moon, there are also (smaller) Half Moon and Black Moon parties–check out http://fullmoonparty-thailand.com for dates. These parties are no longer the hippy, trippy, lovefests of the '70s, but blatantly commercial gigs geared to squeeze as much cash out of revved-up partygoers as possible. As evidence of this, there is now a 100B entrance fee to the Full Moon Party. At Full Moon, even the basic bungalows are going for double the normal rates. As a result, **Leela Beach,** on the northern spur, now pulls more punters than the noisier beach at Had Rin Nok (known as Sunrise Beach).

A word of warning: Party time is also a petty thief's paradise. Do yourself a favor and lock all your valuables in the hotel safe before you party—as experienced thieves take the opportunity to swoop on insecure accommodations while you're having fun.

Boats from Ko Samui leave at regular intervals all day and night on Full Moon nights from either Big Buddha Beach or Bophut (running from 5pm; returning btw. 3 and

Just Say "Mai!"

When it comes to doing drugs in Thailand, remember that "mai" means "no." Thai authorities issue harsh penalties to anyone dealing, in possession of, or using drugs. Numerous undercover drug busts are staged, not just at Full Moon parties, but at bungalow hotels, and at pre- and post-party roadblocks. Many of these stings are setups that you'll never be able to disprove. Dealers and police often work in cahoots, and the lackadaisical Thai legal system offers you no protection or parole. Even scarier, recent reports have highlighted not just the selling of dodgy pharmaceuticals but the lethal herbal hallucinogen *ton lamphong,* a poisonous weed. Taking this is nothing short of suicide. Every month, local hospitals repeatedly find themselves treating tourists suffering severe psychological damage after taking recreational drugs or hallucinogens—they are the lucky ones; some revelers simply go home in a body bag.

8am). Many revelers just make a night of it, crash on the beach, and come back to Samui in the morning. At other times, the small area of Had Rin is busy with young travelers. You'll find New Age crystal, trinket and T-shirt shops, vegetarian restaurants, bars playing DVDs, masseurs, cheap beer, and even cheaper bungalows just a Frisbee's throw away from perfect white-sand beaches. Be careful of the riptides here in monsoon months, and pay attention to the attendant lifeguards now present on the beach.

Don't be too put off by Ko Pha Ngan's party reputation. Had Rin can be avoided altogether and, even during the Full Moon, you can find peace and quiet in any of a number of tranquil hideaways on the island, such as **Thong Nai Pan,** to the north, and **Had Salad** or **Had Yao,** to the west. **Ko Ma** is a small island connected to Ko Pha Ngan by a sandbar on **Had Mae Had** beach. It's a paradise surrounded by an amazingly colorful, living reef—making it an ideal location for snorkeling or learning to dive.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

Frequent boats link the mainland towns of Chumphon or Surat Thani with the islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, or Ko Tao. From Samui's Nathon Pier, the trip to Thong Sala, in Ko Pha Ngan, takes 45 minutes with the **Songserm Express Boat** and costs 250B. Contact them at their local office (✆ **07737-704**); the **Seatran** vehicular ferry service is once daily, leaves from Bang Rak, takes longer, and is only slightly cheaper.

The fastest way to Ko Pha Ngan from Samui is by the twice-daily **Lomprayah Catamaran** (on Samui, ✆ **07742-7765;** on Ko Pha Ngan, ✆ **07723-8412;** www.lomprayah.com), which leaves from **Wat Na Phra Larn** on Maenam. The crossing takes about 20 minutes and costs 400B to 500B. Lomprayah also makes daily connections on to Ko Tao and back to the mainland at Chumphon (but not to Surat Thani). The **Haad Rin Queen** also runs a service four times daily from Big Buddha beach directly to Had Rin Pier that takes 50 minutes for 150B. Boats can also be chartered from **Petcharat Marina** at Samui's Big Buddha Beach (✆ **07742-5262**) or Bophut Beach (rates are greatly inflated during Full Moon parties). You'll also find getting back to the mainland much cheaper than getting there, but exert caution between June and December, as freak storms have been known to put lives at risk.

Fast Facts

The tourist police operate a small information kiosk on the north end of the ferry offices at Thong Sala pier; contact them at ✆ **07737-7114** for info or 1155 in an emergency. There are branches of all the high street banks with **ATMs** both along the main street of Thong Sala and in Had Rin. **Internet** service is chockablock around the island, though prices are inflated—about 120B per hour. For more information about the island, visit www.phangan.info.

Getting Around

Jeep and **motorbike rental** on Ko Pha Ngan is available at most tour companies and resorts across the island (basic jeeps run from 900B; regular motorbikes run from 150B per day). The island roads are steep and treacherous—especially over the hills near Had Rin—so drive carefully. Many interior roads, including the trek to secluded Thong Nai Pan in the north, are hilly, muddy tracks, requiring off-road skills. (It's not just the state of the roads, but also the inexperienced riders on the road, that are problematic.) Jazzed-up **scooters** are rented out for about 300B per day, but if you are not experienced in off-road biking, it's much safer to stick to ***songtaews*** (communal pickups), which follow the main routes and cost from 50B, more at night or during party season.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The rugged roads of Ko Pha Ngan beg to be explored, and interior routes connect bays and small towns across unspoiled countryside—a window into a laid-back island lifestyle that's now slowly disappearing. **Wat Khao Tham** is a well-known international meditation center and temple compound just north of Ban Tai; see www.watkowtahm.org for info. Since 1988, Steve and Rosemary Weissmann (from the U.S. and Australia, respectively) have been offering intensive Theravada Buddhism-based meditation retreats. Introductory 10- to 20-day courses, as well as 3-month work retreats, are open to anyone over 20 years of age, and prices start at 4,500B. As with any retreat, conditions governing behavior apply. The temple is also open to day visitors and overlooks one of the best views on the island. For more details, check the Web or write to Wat Kow Tahm, P.O. Box 18, Ko Pha Ngan, Surat Thani 84280.

WHERE TO STAY

Ban Tai Beach

Most visitors head east to nearby Ban Tai Beach, close to the pier at Thong Sala—here they find a quiet stretch of sand away from the hubbub of Had Rin but close enough to visit the party zone and readily accessible by communal taxi *(songtaew)*. The water, unfortunately, is not really deep enough for swimming, but the fine-sand beach is wide, and most resorts now have pools set on the beachfront. There's a good number of accommodations on hand, from a few original fan bungalows to newly built complexes offering every amenity.

Mac Bay Resort Even with a pool, it's hard for this simple little hideaway to compete with the growing array of better presented and more fashionable resorts along the beach, but its rates are competitive. Revamped rooms are basic concrete huts, but they are right on the sand. Larger air-conditioned rooms are a better choice.

Ban Tai Beach, Ko Pha Ngan 84280 (down a small lane south of the main east-west road). ✆ **07723-8443.** 25 units. 1,200B–2,000B double with A/C. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool. *In room:* A/C.

Milky Bay Resort ★★ Friendly service and midrange luxury are on tap at this beautifully presented resort set in lush gardens with meandering paths to individual bungalows and villas. Choose from five room types, each of which is different in style and creature comforts; rates vary according to low, high, and peak seasons (the rates below just give an idea of the huge range). Next to the stunning oceanfront pool, the restaurant serves delicious BBQ, Thai, and Italian food (you'll even find a proper pizza oven) and overlooks a white-sand beach lapped by the sea. A couple of pool tables will keep some guests happy, while others can indulge in a wonderful Thai massage. The fitness room and steam room come at no extra charge. You can request a pickup from the ferry pier.

102 Moo 1, Ban Tai Beach, Ko Pha Ngan 84280 (4 miles east of Thong Sala). ✆ **07723-8566.** Fax 07737-7726. www.milkybay.com. 34 units. 1,800B standard; 3,000B superior; 8,000B beachfront villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness center; pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD.

Had Rin

Had Rin (aka Haad Rin) is a narrow peninsula on the island's southeastern tip filled with bungalows, busy shopping streets, funky clothes shops, and an array of restaurants between east-facing Had Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach) and Had Rin Nai (Sunset Beach) on the west side. Check out the popular **Rin Bay View Bungalow** (✆ **07737-5188**) or the aptly named **Mellow Mountain Bungalows** (✆ **07737-5347**) for low-end choices, from 500B to 1,000B.

If you wish to transcend it all, tucked away on the soft white-sand beach of Leela (or Had Seekantang) Beach, just 5 minutes over the hilltop, is **Cocohut Village** (✆ **07737-5368;** www.cocohut.com). Spacious bungalows of all sizes start at 2,600B. Next door, **Sarikantang** (✆ **07737-5055;** www.sarikantang.com) has rooms that go from basic fan and cold-shower bungalows right up to a seaview villa; rates range from 900B to 5,400B. Both have beachside restaurants and pools, and are just far enough from town for a bit of peace and quiet, but are close enough to walk down and join the festivities. The original **Leela Bungalows** (no phone) at the end of the beach still offers rustic bungalows, although they could do with a bit of freshening up. **Lighthouse** (no phone) has secluded bungalows set around the rocky cape hillside, accessible by the wooden bridge. Rates for both Leela and the Lighthouse start at around 250B.

Sea Breeze Bungalow (94/11 Moo 6, Had Rin; ✆ **07737-5162**) also offers a quiet, lofty perch high enough above town, yet it is close enough to walk down and join the fun. Fan rooms are 500B and air-conditioned rooms are 800B to 8,000B except at Full Moon. Choose the fan rooms on the cliff, for the best views; plus, the breeze makes air-conditioning unnecessary. There's a hilltop pool with a bar, a wooden boardwalk, and a rickety stairway that provides access to Seekantang Beach.

Drop Inn Club Resort and Spa (154/1–10 Had Rin; ✆ **07737-5444;** www.dropinclub.com) is a resort made up of elegant Thai-style houses clustered around a pool. Prices range from 1,490B for a standard economy room to 5,990B for an executive suite.

Centara Pariya Resort (Had Yuan; ✆ **08647-04251;** www.centarahotelsresorts.com) claims to be the island's first boutique resort. There's no denying it's an exclusive little hideaway, with a clutch of smart rooms and villas that cater to the better-heeled traveler. The resort lies on the increasingly popular and totally gorgeous Had Yuan (Yuan Beach) in the east. Being accessible only by boat has guarded it against the crowds, but it won't be long before it becomes a well-known spot. The style is modern-rustic and comes with the kind of modern amenities that would have been unheard of in this neck of the woods 10 years ago. Prices range from 6,000B to 7,000B.

The Sanctuary Resort and Spa ★★ Hidden behind trees on Had Thien Beach, just a short boat ride to the north of Had Rin, the Sanctuary bills itself as alternative—and it certainly is, with a dazzling range of wellness, dance, and meditative activities and courses, as well as colonic treatments at its adjacent **Wellness & Detox Center.** As much as its yoga, massage, and cleansing programs, the main draw is its tranquillity, and there are plenty of beach activities, too. The choice of accommodations is wide, ranging from simple low-cost dorms and yogi rooms to houses tucked away in the jungle. It's a stark (and perhaps much needed) contrast to the endless nights of overindulgence at Had Rin.

Note: Not all rooms can be booked in advance; some are on a first-come, first-served basis. If coming from Ko Samui, the Thong Nai Pan ferry departs from Mae Nam pier every day at noon (Jan–Oct) and brings you directly to Had Thien on its way.

Had Thien, Ko Pha Ngan. ✆ **08127-13614** (mobile). www.thesanctuarythailand.com. 30 units. 120B dorm; 450B–1,600B bungalows with en suite bathroom; 4,000B deluxe suites. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; spa; watersports rentals; Wi-Fi. *In room:* Suites w/satellite TV, fridge, kitchenette, no phone.

West & North Coast

The west and north coasts have white-sand beaches and are far from the monthly hippy hoedown at Had Rin, which might be a relief for many. Resorts here are quiet and affordable, and growing in number and quality of amenities. The beautifully tranquil Laem Son freshwater lake lies close to Ao Chao Phao, but reports warn that it may be contaminated—don't take any risks. The resorts below follow a clockwise route starting at Had Chaophao on the west.

Had Chaophao

Just 10 minutes west of Thong Sala is **Phangan Cabana Resort** (✆ **07734-9184**), a 34-room joint, popular thanks to high standards of both accommodation and service. It has a swimming pool, and although prices have risen, they are not yet overblown. All rooms have air-conditioning and rates are between $49 and $55.

Had Son

Haad Son Resort (✆ **02674-5555** in Bangkok; www.haadson.com) is a great find, on its own secluded sandy beach over from Had Yao, with good hilltop views of the sea. There are about 40 rooms, some of which are in two-story villas and the others of which are thatched, lakeside villas; all rooms are comfortably equipped and well-spaced, and rates are 4,000B to 5,000B per night. It's a family friendly place with a big pool and a children's pool; kayaks and mountain bikes can be rented.

Had Yao ★★

Had Yao, or Long Beach, is considered by many to be a perfect beach, a quiet but huge stretch of white sand, good for swimming, with the same beautiful sunset views and a laid-back vibe that drew the first travelers here. Supermarkets and Internet cafes up on the main road provide the bulk of services you'll need; good eats can also be found along the beach—it's big enough to play football on.

There are several bungalow resorts ranging from very basic choices, such as the rough-and-ready **Ibiza** (✆ **07734-9121;** www.ibizabungalow.com), starting at 250B for fan rooms with a shared bathroom, or the original **Had Yao Bungalows** (no phone) and **Sandy Bay Bungalows** (no phone; www.sandybaybungalows.com), both offering budget rooms from 300B.

Long Bay Resort ★ Kids This great family resort sits in the middle of Had Yao beach; its free-form pool has been designed so that there's a children's area, too. The property offers a comfortable international standard of rooms and proximity to lots of good local adventure. Families should ask for an extra bed or try the VIP suite that has more space. The open-air beachfront restaurant provides a vast array of delicious Thai and international cuisine. Treat yourself to the fresh catch of the day at the sunset BBQ.

58/5 Had Yao, Ko Pha Ngan 84280 (11km/6¾ miles north of Thong Sala along the west coast). ✆ **07734-9057.** www.long-bay.com. 32 units. 1,500B double with fan; 1,800B–4,500B double with A/C. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Had Salad

This beautiful and secluded sandy beach used to be a pirates' hideout and is good for swimming (Nov–Apr), with a reef about 150m (492 ft.) offshore that is a well-known dive site.

Green Papaya This mellow resort of luxury rustic bungalows is set in gardens and around the beautiful beachside tear-shaped infinity pool. Okay, so it's a little remote, but it's a nature lover's paradise (there's actually solar-heated water). All rooms are well furnished and have such bonuses as outdoor bathrooms with tubs; the two-bed executive-suite pool villas even have outside Jacuzzis. The unique boat-shaped restaurant on-site is a highlight despite the service being rather slow. Some may find the rooms overpriced for what is on offer; nonetheless, resorts of this level are not yet commonplace here.

Had Salad, Ko Pha Ngan 84280 (on the far northwest of the island, about 16km/10 miles north of the ferry). ✆ **07734-9280.** Fax 07734-9278. www.greenpapayaresort.com. 20 units. 4,600B–15,200B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; large pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD, hair dryer, minibar.

Salad Beach Resort ★ Just next to Green Papaya (see above), this is a better value choice, with nice rooms featuring stylish sleeping areas and designer bathrooms. The small pool is lovely and the restaurant is delightful. Thankfully, the sometimes less-than-helpful staff does not detract from the otherwise beautiful setting.

Had Salad, Ko Pha Ngan 84280 (on the far northwest of the island, about 16km/10 miles north of the ferry). ✆ **07734-9274.** www.saladbeachphangan.com. 48 units. 1,441B superior; from 2,006B bungalow. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; pool; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, cable TV, fridge, minibar.

Ao Chalok Lam

This bay is set around a rapidly growing fishing village that is popular with Thai trawlers, but less so among foreign visitors. The beach is not great for swimming, due to its shallow waters, but trips to other northern beaches are possible in rented boats. There are clusters of rustic bungalows on the beaches, such as **Chaloklum Bay Resort** (68 Moo 7, Ao Chalok Lam; ✆ **07737-4147;** www.chaloklumbay.com), which has lots of amenities, including a minisupermarket, and rates of 2,000B to 4,000B per night.

Northeast/Ao Thong Nai Pan

Two adjoining crescent-shaped beaches, 17km (11 miles) north of Had Rin, are differentiated by the suffix *yai* (big) and *noi* (small). This secluded paradise is easily reached by rented boat, or less easily by bumpy dirt track. **Thong Nai Pan Yai** is quieter, while **Thong Nai Pan Noi** has a more bohemian vibe and a small village with some cool bars and restaurants.

Panviman ★★★ The Panviman has got everything you need for a good hideaway vacation. Designed for sophisticated travelers craving tranquillity and natural beauty, this

sprawling resort's luxury cottages are scattered over the hillside above Thong Nai Pan Beach. Rooms are set on a hill with stunning views across the bay, surrounded by tropical plants and shaded by swaying coconut palms. Service is remarkably good and most staff members speak English well. The pool is a multitiered affair, with gorgeous views of the bay below. You're a long hike from the hilltop to the beach, but they have convenient shuttles, and their upscale dining options mean you never have to leave home to find great food.

22/1 Moo 5, Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi Bay, Ko Pha Ngan 84280. ✆ **07744-5101.** Fax 07744-5100. www.panviman.com. 72 units. 4,900B–6,550B superior and deluxe hotel rooms; 6,000B–12,000B cottages; 15,000B spa villas; 17,000B presidential suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; Jacuzzi; pool; room service; watersports rental; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, Jacuzzi, minibar.

Santhiya Resort & Spa ★★★ The teakwood villas that sprawl across 7.2 hectares (18 acres) of prime beachside property offer every luxury to its pampered guests, and along with near-neighbor Panviman, this resort provides the top accommodation option on Ko Pha Ngan. All rooms are huge and enjoy fabulous views of the bay, while the top-end villas feature private pools. The Ayurvana Spa is the perfect place to while away an afternoon after an exhausting swim in the 1,200-sq.-m. (12,917-sq.-ft.) pool; and the terrace of the Chantara Restaurant is ideal for a delicious Thai dinner. As a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, you can depend on impeccable service, too.

22/7 Banthai, Ko Pha Ngan 84280. ✆ **07742-8999.** Fax 07742-8900. www.santhiya.com. 76 units. 12,000B deluxe room; 16,000B seaview villa suite; 50,000B royal pool villa suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; fitness center; huge pool; room service; spa; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD player, hair dryer, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE

Cheap eats of every type abound in busy Had Rin and, increasingly, even in the smaller villages here. Note that most restaurants here use mobile numbers, not landlines.

For a homey meal, check out **L'Embuscade** (✆ 087061-0116), a French restaurant on the market road, which has a small terrace and chunky wood chairs. The French owners produce great croissants and fresh bread, and they dish up French favorites including the classic duck breast, *magret de canard.* Near the pier, **Om Ganesh** (✆ **07737-5123**) serves up authentic curries and all-you-can-eat Indian *thali* meals, but it's very popular—book ahead. The Italian restaurant **Kimera** (no phone), on the beach road, serves delicious pizzas. Also on the beach road in Had Rin, don't miss **Emotion of Sushi Bamboozle,** for Mexican delights; or **Nira's Bakery,** for breakfast.

For a special occasion, try **Me'n'u,** over near Ao Hin Kong, on the coastal road north of Thong Sala (✆ **089289-7133,** mobile; www.menu-phangan.com). It's open for dinner only and closed on Mondays. In Had Yao, check out the **Hideaway Bakery** (no phone) for fresh breads and cakes. At night, the two-story **Eagle Pub** (no phone), built into the rocks at the southern end of the beach, is a cool nightspot, with a steakhouse and DJs playing tunes to suit every mood.

6 KO TAO ★

55km (34 miles) N of Ko Samui; 80km (50 miles) SE of Chumphon

Some 75 years ago, tiny **Ko Tao,** or **Turtle Island**—so-named for its outline and resident marine life—was a penitentiary for insurgents, though few visitors these days would find any punishment in being marooned on its idyllic shores. Until lately, it has been known

almost exclusively as a destination for divers. With the arrival of some chic new resorts recently, the island's appeal is far wider and, in turn, the island is rapidly going upmarket. Though dive resorts (and a social scene based around the local diving expats) do dominate, there are still lots of rustic budget choices, as well as the sort of secluded high-end hideaways that won't oblige you to book a dive.

As its popularity grows, power outages become more frequent, and, each high season, the island suffers from a scarcity of water. Nonetheless, it is blessed with pretty offshore isles, clear turquoise waters, and pristine coral reefs. Nestled in secluded bays are numerous stunning resorts, reached by boat, or by a roller coaster ride in a jeep or four-wheel drive. Just off the northwest corner lies a trio of islets known as **Ko Nang Yuan** or **Ko Hang Tao** (Turtle's Tail). **Had Sai Ree** and **Ban Mae Had,** both on the west coast, form the main centers, where you'll find most of the budget accommodations and dive resorts. There are excellent restaurants, some fun bars, and Internet cafes along this long shore, and there are plenty of funky boutiques and trendy shops over at the **Sairee Shopping Center.**

As many properties here don't have land lines, you should instead head to the useful website www.kohtaoonline.com. It offers an Internet booking service as well as lots of updated info on island life, boat timetables, dive packages, and environmental concerns.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

Songserm Express (in Ko Tao; ✆ **07745-6274**) boats leave from Surat Thani and connect nearby islands; fares from Ko Samui are 500B, fares from Ko Pha Ngan are 250B, plus there's a daily morning boat from Chumphon for 450B. Boats run subject to weather conditions in monsoon season.

Lomprayah High Speed Catamarans (✆ **07745-6176** local office; www.lomprayah.com) also makes the connection from Samui, via Ko Pha Ngan, and onto Chumphon twice daily: From Chumphon the fare is 550B; from Ko Samui, 550B; and from Ko Pha Ngan, 350B. There are also night boats from Surat Thani and Chumphon with basic sleeping accommodations.

Caution: The south and western beaches can get blasted by the monsoon winds June through October, when the normally transparent seas get churned up; but even during November to January (high season), there can be squalls. If you have an onward flight to catch, reserve an extra day or two, in case of delays.

Orientation & Getting Around

All boats arrive in **Ban Mae Had** on the west of the island. Touts from resorts and scuba operators alike line the quay. (As long as it's not high season, and you can be flexible, you can find good deals by bargaining here.) A single concrete road connects the northwestern tip from the basic CFT resort to **Ban Had Sai Ree** and heads south (with the island's longest beach running parallel) through **Ban Mae Had** to **Ao Chalok Ban Kao,** but elsewhere the roads are steep, loose dirt tracks, most of which are very challenging. It's possible to walk over the headlands (just be mindful of the occasional dropping coconut). Pickups and motorbike taxis (prices vary from 20B–300B) are easy to find in Mae Had or by the pier, but difficult to find elsewhere. Taxi prices are not fixed, and fares tend to double after dark. Make sure you negotiate an acceptable fare before setting out.

Scooters can be rented for upwards of 150B per day from most resorts; it's a good idea not to hire bikes from the cowboys around the pier. If you are looking at car hire, beware that some companies charge outrageously for damages.

More remote bays, such as the eastern bays of **Ao Leuk, Ao Ta Note,** and **Ao Hin Wong,** are reachable by four-wheel-drive or boat, but most high-end resorts can simply arrange pickup.

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive/Moderate

Charm Churee Villa ★★ These rustic lodgings sit on a forested hill atop a secluded cove, just a 10-minute walk from Ban Mae Had. Every room is uniquely designed, with magnificent sea views; and the private cove is a great spot to explore the surrounding blue waters with a snorkel and mask. Chaba Seafood restaurant here is known as one of the best in the area.

30/1 Moo 2, Jansom Bay (just south of the ferry landings at Ban Mae Had), Ko Tao 84280. ✆ **07745-6393.** Fax 07745-6475. www.charmchureevilla.com. 30 units. 3,330B–5,130B double; from 6,930B villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Jamahkiri Spa & Resort ★★★ Perhaps the island's most upmarket resort, the awesomely designed Jamahkiri is accessible by precipitous mountain track that might make you reconsider the return trip. The good news is that you might not mind being stranded at this unique boutique gem. Overlooking the bay are a clutch of grey-tile and glass pavilions and suites; some are duplex, but all have oceanview balconies. There is a top-notch spa area and fine dining outlet; public areas are grand, with pleasant nooks but lots of steep steps. Though it's far from the action, this is undoubtedly the most extravagant option on the island.

Ao Thian Ok, on the southern end of the island. ✆ **07745-6400.** www.jamahkiri.com. 20 units. 3,900B deluxe room; 6,900B–7,900B pavilion; 9,900B–13,900B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness room; pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Thipwimarn Resort ★★ Tiny, but utterly charming, this vertiginous cliffside boutique resort may not have that many bells and whistles, but is one of the most charming places in the south. Thatched cottages with lots of steps and wood walkways teeter above the azure ocean. Superbly designed rooms are furnished with canopy beds, stunning Thai silks, and teak wood. The four suite types all offer glorious views of the Nang Yuan islets, while the sunset can be seen from either the huge balconies or the picture-perfect infinity pool. A spa with oceanview Jacuzzi tops off this elegantly rustic, but nonetheless refined, gem. Book well in advance to secure a room; note that it closes annually in November.

14/5 Moo 1, Had Sai Ree (northern tip of Had Sai Ree), Ko Tao 84280. ✆/fax **07745-6409** or 07745-6512. www.thipwimarnresort.com. 11 units. 2,850B–5,400B double; 11,600B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, Jacuzzi (in suite), minibar.

Inexpensive

Had Sai Ree has an enormously wide range of budget options available to walk-in guests, but many are booked through budget scuba packages—popular with long-stay guests who want to get more extensive scuba certification. On the far south end of the island, one popular all-inclusive scuba resort is **Big Bubble Dive Resort** (✆ **07745-6669;** www.bigbubble.info); rooms range from 300B to 1,500B.

Sai Ree Cottages (✆ **07745-6126**) and **Blue Wind** (✆ **07745-6116**) on Had Sai Ree are popular bungalow resorts, with rooms from 300B and good restaurants. **Simple Life** (✆ **07745-6142**) is a dive resort with comfy bungalows with fans or air-conditioning running from 400B, and a busy bar.

WHERE TO DINE

The choices for where to dine here are endless, as most resorts have their own in-house dining facilities or fun bars. In Sai Ree Village, on the north end of Sai Ree Beach, **Papa's Tapas** (no phone) is the brainchild of a group of expat entrepreneurs who conjure up a constantly evolving menu in a casual candlelit, open-air pavilion. **Choppers Bar and Grill** (no phone) has a multilevel diner with big screen sports. Also on the north end, look for **New Heaven,** a popular sandwich and breakfast stop.

In Mae Had, there's **La Matta** (no phone), for delicious Italian pizzas and a shot of good Italian espresso (it's in Sai Ree too); **Café Del Sol** (no phone), for great Italian and steaks (among many other goodies); and **Dirty Nelly's** (no phone), down near the pier, a great place for pub grub and a pint of Irish beer.

KO TAO AFTER DARK

Most of the action is right on Mae Had beach, where you'll find stacks of stylish retro bars, dance spots where international DJs spin their best sounds, and amazing fire jugglers performing amid stunning sand sculptures. **Whitening** is a popular beachside bar perfect for cocktails and soothing sounds. For a more fashionable drinking venue, **Dragon Bar** has an unusually upscale vibe for Ban Mae Had.

Most big bars here also have dance floors; one of the best is at **Pure Beach Lounge,** which has frequent parties and is a great place to sprawl on beanbags or chill out watching the sunset.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Known as one of the best diving areas in Thailand, Ko Tao is a great place to get a very affordable start with the sport or to advance on your levels. Responsible divers should check out the **Ko Tao Dive Operators' Club (DOC),** which imposes a uniform code of conduct and safety standards on its members. Some to consider are:

- **Planet Scuba,** in Ban Mae Had (✆ **07745-6415;** www.planet-scuba.net)
- **Easy Divers,** in Ban Mae Had (at the catamaran jetty; ✆ **07745-6010;** www.thaidive.com)
- **Scuba Junction,** on Sai Ree Beach (✆ **07745-6164;** www.scuba-junction.com)

SIDE TRIPS FROM KO TAO

Local aquanauts agree that the best **scuba diving** in the region is off nearby **Ko Nang Yuan** (just off the northwest tip of Ko Tao), which benefits from deep water just offshore and great visibility. Ko Nang Yuan consists of three small islands joined by a spectacular sandbar. Because it's famed for its wonderful snorkeling, numerous companies offer day trips here. Look into unique dive-and-stay packages at **Nang Yuan Resort** (✆ **07745-6088-93;** www.nangyuan.com), uniquely set over the three islands, with rooms starting as low as 1,500B to plush family suites around 14,000B.

7 THE FAR SOUTH & ON TO MALAYSIA

From Surat Thani south, Thailand slowly gives way to Malay culture, and Buddhism—predominant in the central and northern parts of the country—is replaced by Islam. Nakhon Si Thammarat is an ancient Buddhist city of note but often ignored by visitors

from overseas. In the far south, Had Yai is a major transport hub and a destination popular with Malay and Singaporean sex tourists, where HIV rates are known to be extremely high; in 2000, a *Time* magazine report called it a boomtown "built on the sex trade." It's mostly a stopover for onward travel to or from Malaysia.

Note: The far south of Thailand has seen years of violence by separatist insurgents. Their attacks are becoming increasingly widespread but are aimed at any institution with government or Buddhist links. Few travelers pass Nakhon Si Thammarat, except those going on to Malaysia or to Singapore via Had Yai. Stay abreast of events before traveling here.

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

Nakhon Si Thammarat is one of the south's oldest cities, though it has a rather unappealing "new" town in addition to its more charming older quarters. It has long been a religious capital and stages some dazzling festivals. **Wat Phra Mahathat,** the town's 1,000-year-old main temple, houses some of the Buddha's relics in its large *chedi* brought from Sri Lanka, from where it is believed Theravada Buddhism came to Thailand; it's therefore an important place of pilgrimage for Thai Buddhists. This region is also the locus for traditional Thai shadow plays. **Ban Nang Thalung Suchart Subsin** (Mr. Subsin's House of Shadow Plays), at 110/18 Sri Thammasok, Soi 3 (✆ **07534-6394**), makes for an interesting introduction to this art form.

Budget carrier **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com) connects Nakhon Si Thammarat with Bangkok. All north-south trains make a stop at the main train station (✆ **07535-6364**), and affordable minivans (which are the best way to travel in the south) can be arranged from any tour company. Southeast of the city, the **Twin Lotus Hotel,** 97/8 Phattanakan Rd. (✆ **07532-3777**), is a high-rise block, providing comfortable rooms starting at 1,000B.

HAD YAI

Known to travelers as the gateway to Malaysia and one of the bigger cities in Thailand, Had Yai is today a hotbed of political unrest. For some time now, it has been plagued with bouts of violence, regular pipe bombings, fatal attacks, and frequent murders of Buddhist monks, rubber workers, and schoolchildren. The situation is now extremely unstable. Its busy Night Market was once a highlight, but, these days, I recommend asking around if it's safe to visit. Still, the unspoiled beaches at nearby **Songkhla** (45-min. away) are a great escape from the urban sprawl of Had Yai. Famous for its seafood and the attractive island of Ko Yo, floating in the inland sea, this little isle is a cotton-weaving center, with a folklore museum and nice hikes.

Had Yai International Airport (airport code HDY)**,** 9km (5⅔ miles) from downtown Had Yai, welcomes flights from Malaysia and Singapore frequently throughout the week via Silk Air, Malaysia Airlines, and some budget airlines, and there are domestic connections to Bangkok and Phuket. Check chapter 3 for airline info.

Minibuses still make trips to the border at Pedang Besar and connect from other parts of the region, and long-distance buses connect with the **Bangkok Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111**). Five trains depart daily from **Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **02621-8701** or 1690) to Had Yai Junction, with connections on to Malaysia. The once-daily Singapore–Bangkok Express also stops at Had Yai.

There are dozens of low- and midpriced hotels located near the railway station, most with air-conditioned rooms, and several tourist-class hotels with the usual amenities. The best on offer (if you like character-filled old charm) is the **Regency Hotel,** 23 Prachathipat Rd. (✆ **07423-4400**), with rooms from 1,000B, and **J&B Hotel,** 99 Jootee-Ausom Rd., Had Yai (✆ **07423-4300**), with rooms from 1,050B. The popular backpacker haunt, **Cathay Guest House,** 93/1 Niphat Uthit 2 Rd. (✆ **07424-3815**), could do with a lick of paint, but it has reasonable singles from 200B.

10

Southern Peninsula: The West Coast & Islands

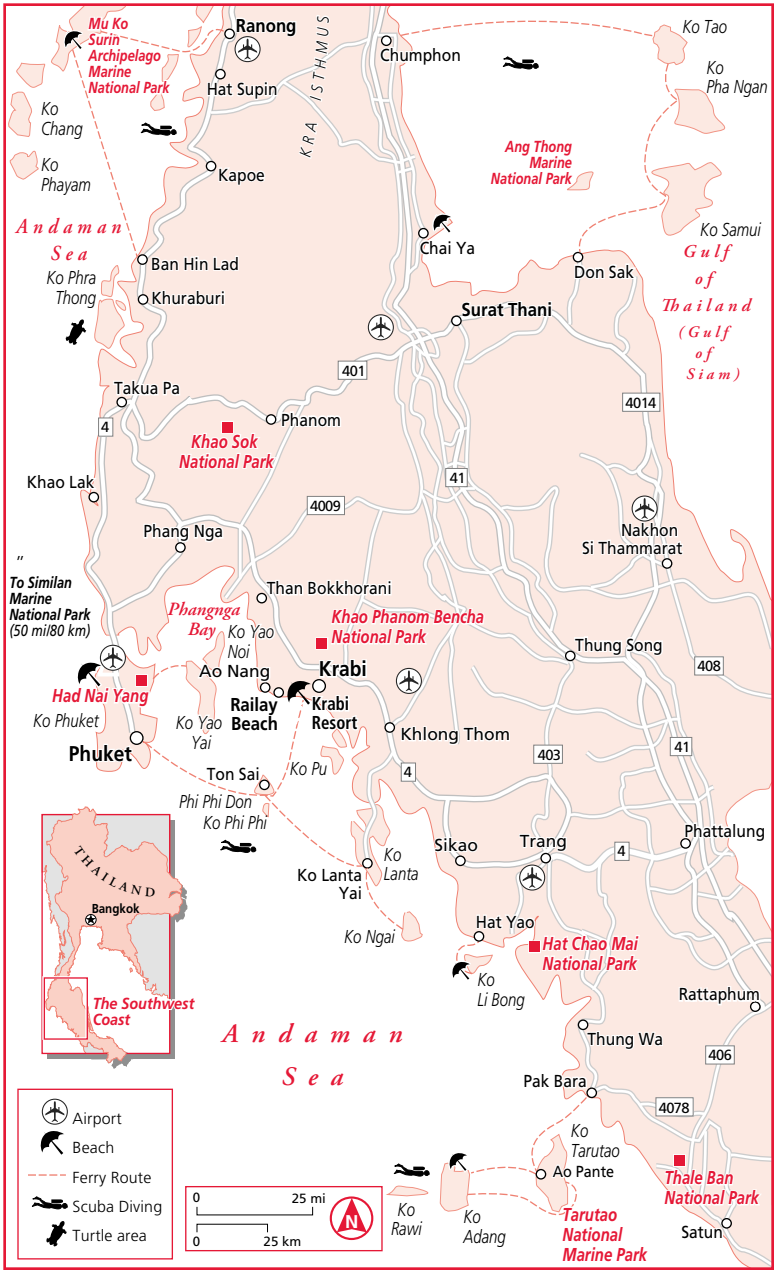
The island of Phuket, linked by a causeway to peninsular Thailand, was one of Thailand's first tourist developments. Today, it's a perennially popular mass-tourism magnet. In the dry season (Nov–Mar), this coast is a great place to island-hop, either by Destination Air's amphibious aircraft service or by ferry.

With its increasing wealth and popularity come less savory influences, however: Mafia activity and unscrupulous developers keen to earn a fast buck from the pristine environment are common, especially as resort centers, such as **Patong,** in Phuket continue to rebuild after damage caused by a tsunami in December of 2004.

The province of **Krabi** has been a bit more eco-savvy than bolder, brassier Phuket and has long banned such beach activities as jet skis and parasailing, making it popular with crowds looking for nature, not nightlife. The province encompasses all the land east of **Phang Nga Bay,** including **Ko Phi Phi** and **Ko Lanta.** Close to Krabi town, **Ao Nang Beach** and **Railay** offer backdrops of dramatic limestone cliffs, powder-soft beaches, and high-end resorts. **Ko Phi Phi** is still a popular venue for snorkeling and dive trips despite the tsunami damage; however, the island's National Park designation (theoretically, meant to preserve its outstanding beauty) has been shamefully ignored. **Ko Lanta Yai,** better known as **Ko Lanta,** lies southeast of Krabi Town. Once home solely to Muslim fishing villages, it now boasts the whole gamut of resorts from budget to superluxe.

Right at the southernmost tip of Phuket is the idyllic isle of **Ko Racha** (sometimes called Ko Raja or Raya), with its jade-green seas. Northward is **Phang Nga** province and, on its west coast, **Khao Lak,** the gateway to popular dive spots around the **Similan** and **Surin Islands.** This coastline was worst hit by the tsunami in 2004, but such volunteer groups as **ETC** (see "Side Trips from Phuket: Khao Lak and Offshore Islands") have done much to alleviate the pain by teaching new skills to the unemployed. To the south, **Trang Province**'s white-sand beaches, caves, and waterfalls make it one of Thailand's best-kept secrets.

During high season (Nov–Apr), bookings for all west coast resorts should be made well in advance; expect hefty surcharges across the Christmas/New Year weeks. This season is great for all watersports. Many hotels offer discounts in the off-season, when heavy rains bring very strong winds and rough seas (the latter being blamed for a fatal air crash that occurred in Phuket in 2007). Swimming becomes dangerous then, with heavy surf and a strong undertow. Islands in the eastern Gulf of Thailand (**Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan,** and **Ko Tao**) are more sheltered, and off-season discounts and fewer crowds make this region most appealing then.


Mu Ko Surin Archipelago Marine National Park
Ranong
Hat Supin
KRA ISTHMUS
Chumphon
Ko Tao
Ko Pha Ngan
Ko Chang
Ko Phayam
Kapoe
Ang Thong Marine National Park
Andaman Sea
Ban Hin Lad
Ko Phra Thong
Khuraburi
Chai Ya
Don Sak
Ko Samui
Gulf of Thailand (Gulf of Siam)
Surat Thani
401
4014
Takua Pa
4
Phanom
Khao Sok National Park
41
Khao Lak
4009
Phang Nga
Nakhon Si Thammarat
To Similan Marine National Park (50 mi/80 km)
Than Bokkhorani
Phangnga Bay
Ko Yao Noi
Khao Phanom Bencha National Park
Thung Song
408
Ao Nang
Krabi
Had Nai Yang
Railay Beach
Krabi Resort
Ko Phuket
Ko Yao Yai
Khlong Thom
403
41
Phuket
Ton Sai
Ko Pu
4
Phi Phi Don
Ko Phi Phi
Sikao
Trang
Phattalung
4
Ko Lanta Yai
Ko Lanta
Ko Ngai
Hat Yao
Hat Chao Mai National Park
Ko Li Bong
Rattaphum
Thung Wa
406
Pak Bara
4078
Ko Tarutao
Ao Pante
Thale Ban National Park
Tarutao National Marine Park
Satun
Ko Rawi
Ko Adang
THAILAND
Bangkok
The Southwest Coast
Airport
Beach
Ferry Route
Scuba Diving
Turtle area
0 25 mi
0 25 km
N

1 GETTING TO KNOW PHUKET ★★

867km (539 miles) SW of Bangkok

The name "Phuket" is derived from the Malay word "Bukit" (meaning hill); true to the name, lush, green hills dominate much of the island's interior. There are still some rubber plantations and relics of the island's tin mining operations remaining. Most folks head west to the beaches; Phuket's are some of the best in Thailand. The best way to see the island is by taking an (albeit utterly hair-raising) drive around the cliff roads, a totally touristy "elephant safari" into the jungle, or opt for an unforgettable sea kayak tour with John Gray, whose guided trips visit incredible offshore caves and limestone *hong* (literally "rooms"—hidden lagoons with sheer walls that become accessible at low tide).

In dry season, Phuket is at its best: you'll get long sandy beaches, warm water, and excellent snorkeling and scuba diving. It also boasts some of the best seafood in Thailand. Sure, its prices are more than a tad overblown, but for well-heeled fun-seekers who want to be at the heart of the action, Phuket is a fabulous choice.

Phuket does, however, have a downside: Tracts of hideous overdevelopment have spawned unsightly concrete bunkers patronized by budget tour groups from Asia, Russia, and Europe. Areas such as Patong, with its seedy commercial strip and sleazy nightlife, can be a bit much for families or single women travelers in search of tranquillity, but with the arrival of a swish shopping mall, JungCeylon, and the adjoining Millennium Phuket Resort, plus upmarket diners such as The Boathouse on Kata Beach, things, at last, are looking up.

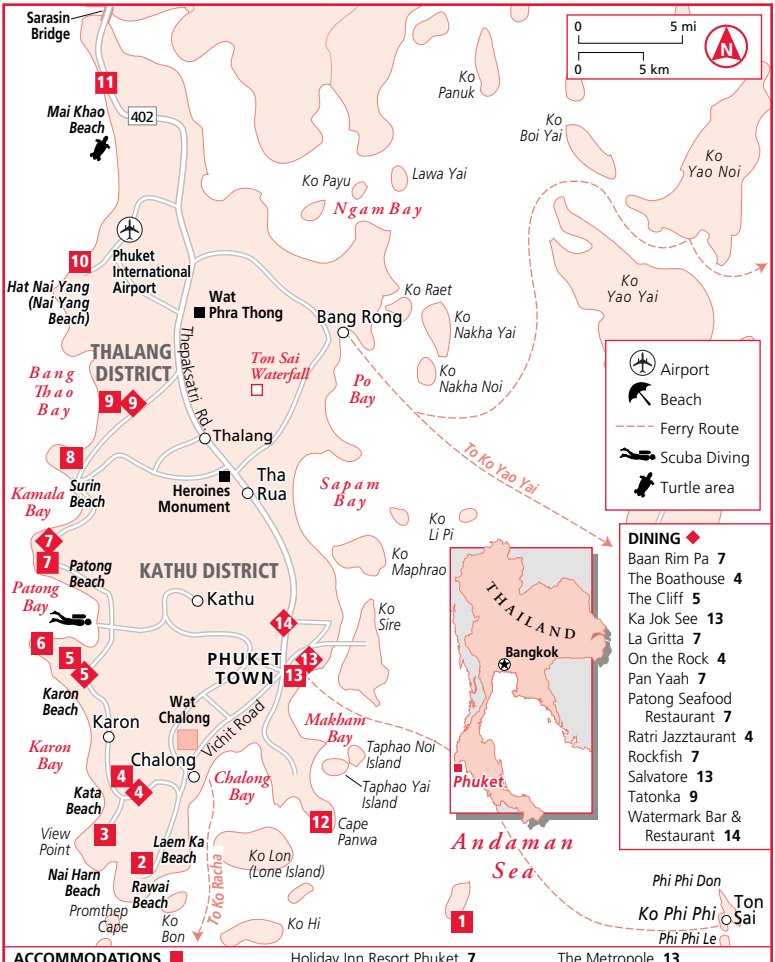
If escape at any cost is what you need, Phuket has heaps of elegant resorts designed for tropical solitude; a good number, such as the Banyan Tree, offer private villas and pools. Evason Phuket even offers a honeymoon villa on its own island, Ko Bon. Expect superlative facilities with levels of service beyond those in Europe. But with prices here way above those even in Bangkok, it's not ideal for those on a tight budget. If you need to keep costs down, consider the Eastern Gulf islands or lesser known atolls in Phang Nga Bay, or go south to more reasonable Trang.

Even after over 5 years, the impact of the 2004 tsunami, which struck a devastating blow to the resorts along Thailand's west coast, including Phuket, and across the now up-and-coming region of Khao Lak, cannot be glossed over. Today, most resorts are back to full capacity; many in fact used the disaster as an opportunity to renovate and upgrade. Khao Lak is fast becoming the "next" Phuket, whereas Phi Phi is still struggling to go upmarket. While some may feel put off about visiting this region, tourism is still the mainstay of the economy. Without support from travelers, Thais in this region simply have no chance to get back on their feet.

ARRIVING

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **02545-3690** domestic reservations in Bangkok; www.thaiair.com) flies daily from both **Bangkok's Don Muang Airport** and **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (trip time: 1 hr. 20 min.). Thai Airways' office in Phuket is at 78 Ranong Rd. (✆ **07636-0444**).

Bangkok Airways (✆ **02270-6699** in Bangkok, or 07724-5600 on Ko Samui; www.bangkokair.com) connects Phuket with Ko Samui at least two times daily. The Bangkok Airways office in Phuket is at 158/2–3 Yaowarat Rd., Phuket Town (✆ **07622-5033,** or 07620-5401 at Phuket Airport).



DINING

Baan Rim Pa **7**
The Boathouse **4**
The Cliff **5**
Ka Jok See **13**
La Gritta **7**
On the Rock **4**
Pan Yaah **7**
Patong Seafood Restaurant **7**
Ratri Jazztaurant **4**
Rockfish **7**
Salvatore **13**
Tatonka **9**
Watermark Bar & Restaurant **14**

ACCOMMODATIONS

Amanpuri **8**
Amari Coral Beach Resort **7**
Andaman Seaview Hotel **5**
Andatel Patong **7**
Ayara Hilltops **8**
Baan Krating Jungle Beach Resort **2**
Banyan Tree Phuket **9**
Burasari Resort **7**
Cape Panwa Hotel **12**
Centara Villas Phuket **5**
The Chedi Phuket **8**
The Diamond Cliff Resort & Spa **7**
Dusit Laguna Resort **9**
Evason Phuket **2**
Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort & Spa **5**
Holiday Inn Resort Phuket **7**
Horizon Patong Beach Resort & Spa **7**
Indogo Pearl Resort **10**
JW Marriott Resort & Spa **11**
Karon Beach Resort **5**
Karona Resort & Spa **5**
Katathani Hotel **3**
Kata Country House **4**
Katanoi Bay Inn **3**
Kelly's Hotel **7**
Laguna Beach Resort **9**
Le Meridien Phuket **6**
Mangosteen **2**
Marina Phuket **5**
Merlin Beach Resort & Patong Merlin **7**
The Metropole **13**
Millennium Resort Patong Phuket **7**
Mom Tri's Boathouse & Villa Royale **4**
Mövenpick Resort & Spa **5**
Orchid Garden Guesthouse **2**
The Racha **1**
Phuket Pavilions **9**
Royal Phuket City Hotel **13**
The Royal Phuket Yacht Club **2**
Sawasdee Village **4**
Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket **9**
Trisara **10**
Twin Palms Phuket **8**

Budget airlines flying here include **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999;** www.airasia.com) and **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com). Connecting with Singapore is **Silk Air** (✆ **07630-4020** in Phuket; www.silkair.com). Budget carriers **Tiger Airways** (✆ **02649-9688;** www.tigerairways.com) and Qantas subsidiary **Jetstar** (✆ **02267-5125;** www.jetstar.com) also have regular connections from Phuket to Singapore; Jetstar flies directly to Australia, too.

Destination Air (✆ **07632-8637;** www.destinationair.com) is a charter air service based at 22/9 Airport Rd., Maikhao, Amphur Taolang, Phuket 83110, running small, amphibious light aircraft between island resorts such as Krabi (trip time: 12 min.), Ko Lanta (trip time: 28 min.) and Ko Phi Phi (trip time: 16 min.). Rates are not cheap, with the cheapest costing around 5,000B, but it might be worth it if time is tight.

GETTING FROM THE AIRPORT TO TOWN The modern **Phuket International Airport** (✆ **07632-7230-7;** www.phuketairportonline.com) is in the north of the island, about a 45-minute drive from Patong Beach in off-peak hours, or an hour in rush hour (8–9am and 4–7pm). There are banks, money-changing facilities, car-rental agents (see "Getting Around," below), and a post office at the airport. The **Phuket Tourist Business Association** booth there can help you make hotel arrangements if you need accommodations.

For a fee, many resorts will pick you up at the airport; check if this is included in your booking. An **airport bus** runs (approximately hourly until 6:30pm) to Phuket Town bus terminal and costs 85B, while a **minibus** service charges 100B to Phuket Town, 150B to Patong Beach, or 180B to Kata Beach. Just outside the terminal to the right is a **meter taxi** stand. You'll need to check the estimated price with the driver—based on how far you are going, plan on spending 600B to 800B. There is a ready supply at the right on exiting the terminal. To book a meter taxi, call ✆ **07637-9571.**

The airport **limousine** counter (✆ **07620-4128**) offers many options for getting to your hotel from the airport. A prepaid **car** from the airport can also be arranged at the limousine counter; you'll pay between 600B to Phuket Town and 750B to Kata Beach.

BY BUS Three supercooled air-conditioned VIP buses leave daily from **Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111**) and cost from 1,000B. These buses feature fewer seats, more room, Arctic temperatures, a usually deafening all-night action movie, hostesses, and snacks. Numerous regular air-conditioned buses go each day and cost around 540B. Standard buses make frequent connections to Surat Thani and nearby towns on the mainland (to Surat is 5 hr. and about 160B).

The intercity bus terminal is at the **City Park Complex** on Phang Nga Road (✆ **07621-1480**), east of Phuket Town, just opposite the Royal Phuket City Hotel. For information on how to get from here to the beaches, see "Getting Around," below.

BY MINIVAN Minivans to and from Surat Thani, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Ranong, and other southern cities leave on regular schedules throughout the day. In each city, minivan operators work with the hotels and arrange free pickup, so it is best to book through your hotel front desk or a travel agent. Tickets to destinations in the south, to such places as Surat Thani or Had Yai, go for between 200B and 500B. ***Note:*** Operators of minivan companies rarely speak English.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)** has an office in Phuket Town at 191 Thalang Rd. (✆ **07621-2213**), but, in general, hotel concierge or independent tour desks offer more up-to-date information. There are lots of free maps on offer (all are full of

advertisements); for driving around the island, pick up the very detailed *Map of Phuket* (Periplus Editions) at bookstores. Restaurants and hotel lobbies are good places to pick up any of a number of free local publications: *Phuket Food-Shopping-Entertainment* is packed with dining suggestions and ads for many of the island's activities; *What's On South* has some useful information on Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, and Krabi; and there a few fun local magazines for sale. Also look out for the useful *Art & Culture South* and *Old Phuket Treasure Map.*

ISLAND LAYOUT

If you arrive by car or coach, you'll cross into Phuket from the mainland at the northern tip of the island via the **Sarasin Bridge,** along Route 402. Phuket Town, the island's historic and commercial center, is in the southeast of the island at the terminus of Route 402; local buses connect at **Phuket Town Bus Station,** on Phang Nga Road, east of the town center. Phuket's picturesque stretches of sand dot the western coast from Nai Harn, on the southern tip, to Mai Khao, about 48km (30 miles) north, via Kata Noi, Kata, Karon, Patong, Kamala, Surin, Bang Tao, and a number of smaller beaches north along this corridor. A busy coastal road links the popular tour towns in the south, but stops north of Patong, requiring a short detour from the main highway. The four corners of Phuket are linked with just a few busy main arterial roads. Renting a vehicle is the best way to tour the island's smaller byways or make the trip to jungle parks, such as **Khao Phra Thaew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve,** in the northeast of the isle, famed for diverse flora and fauna. The western beaches have all the services visitors might need, but everything comes with resort prices—and don't expect to find any real Thai feel here. For a taste of Thai life, affordable services, and authentic restaurants, explore Phuket Town (especially if this is your only urban destination down south).

THE BEACHES There's a beach for everyone in Phuket, from private stretches belonging to exclusive hideaways to public bays lined with beach chairs and buzzing with jet skis. There are even camping spots close to such places as pristine Mai Khao beach. Each beach is distinct, and selecting the appropriate area makes all the difference.

Nai Harn, the southernmost bay on the west coast, is home to only one major beachfront resort, but has a host of smaller family friendly resorts and bungalows set back from the coast. Laid-back and quiet in the monsoon season, Nai Harn attracts surfers and other watersports enthusiasts. The sand is fine and the water deep. As a public beach, with a few local eateries, it makes for a great day trip, if you're staying at a more populated beach and want to run away for the day (a good long motorbike/car ride south of Kata/Karon).

Rawai Beach and **Chalong Beach** are two well-known, eastern-facing beaches, both hosting a few resorts, such as the luxurious Evason Phuket, and some outdoor seafood or barbecue restaurants. **Cape Panwa,** between Chalong and Phuket Town, also has scenic hidden beaches with a range of hotels and restaurants.

North of Nai Harn are the more popular developed beaches: **Kata, Kata Noi,** and **Karon beaches.** Though they are getting developed, they're not quite reaching the levels of over-the-top Patong. Along these beaches, you'll find resorts large and small. In general this area is all upmarket, though there are a few budget places that haven't been bulldozed and made high-end yet. Sandy beaches are long and picturesque, and the water is deep, with some nice wave breaks. This beach area has more restaurants than the remote bays and some shopping, nightlife, and travel agent options as well. But you won't find rowdy

crowds here and, even with all the development, the area manages to maintain a laid-back character.

North of the Kata and Karon bays, you'll pass through **Relax Bay,** a small cove with a few resorts, before rolling down the mountain to **Patong Beach,** the most famous (perhaps infamous) strip on the island. Patong's draw is its seamy Patpong-styled nightlife, busy shops and restaurants, and brash in-your-face beat. Not surprisingly, commercial sex workers flock here to service lovelorn foreign customers. Accommodations run the gamut from five-star resorts to budget motels. Love it or hate it, the town has the most diverse selection of dining facilities and highest concentration of tour and dive operators, watersports, shopping, and nightlife. Most visitors end up spending a few nights on this strip. The drawbacks are all too visible—endless parades of pushy touts pounce on you at every step. While some adults may find the nightlife titillating, families with kids may want to avoid some of the lurid displays of obscenity on offer. If you love to be in the center of it all, stay in Patong; if you want some peace, stay away.

North of Patong, **Kamala Bay, Surin Beach,** and **Bang Tao Beach** have more secluded resorts on lovely beaches for those who want the convenience of nearby Patong but cherish the serenity of a quiet resort.

About two-thirds of the way to the northern tip of the island, **Bang Tao Beach** is home to the **Laguna Resort Complex,** a partnership of five world-class resorts sharing excellent facilities and a fabulous beach. While this area is rather far from both Patong Beach and Phuket Town, the many dining and activity options make it quite self-sufficient for those with the means.

Far north of the main resort areas, **Nai Thon** and **Nai Yang Beaches** have limited facilities and may not appeal to most, but for real beach lovers, they are a dream come true. Nai Thon is possibly the most beautiful beach on the entire island, while at Nai Yang there is a coral reef 1,000m (3,280 ft.) offshore, just a short ride in a longtail boat. If you are looking to get back to nature, these two beaches or Mai Khao, a little farther north, are your best bet.

Mai Khao is the northernmost beach in Phuket and is famed as being prime habitat for sea turtles. It is designated National Parkland, but with all the development in the area, few sea turtles are returning here to lay eggs. Since 1996, an Italian-run marine charity has been working with (paying) volunteers and school kids to reverse this (see **www.naucrates.org** for info). For the time being, this steep, desolate beach hosts just one luxury resort: the JW Marriott, Phuket, which was carefully built to respect the ecology. More developments, with no interest in eco-ethics, are sadly encroaching on this supposedly "protected" stretch of coast, though.

GETTING AROUND

Public transportation on Phuket is a problem that never seems to get solved. If you've spent any time in other parts of the country, you'll know that the covered pickup trucks that cruise the streets picking up and dropping off passengers are called *songtaews,* while the noisy motorized three-wheel vehicular demons are known as tuk-tuks. Not on Phuket: Here, locals call communal pickup trucks tuk-tuks, while *songtaews* are the giant colorful buses that ply the main roads (also called baht buses).

Here's the problem: *Songtaews* are only permitted to travel from a beach to Phuket Town (not from beach to beach). Tuk-tuk drivers have exclusive rights to transport people between beaches, so the "service" is run as a racket—pay the fare they demand, or

walk. At night, tuk-tuk drivers are known to charge solo passengers up to 1,000B to go from Karon to Patong Beach, but they are the only game in town. Budget travelers on limited funds must bear this in mind to avoid getting stranded late at night. If you plan to stay several days and want to explore the island, renting a car is the obvious answer.

BY SONGTAEW The local bus terminal is in front of the Central Market, on Ranong Road, in Phuket Town. Fares to the most popular beaches range from 20B to 30B. *Songtaews* leave when full, usually every 30 minutes, and they run from 7am to 6pm between Phuket Town and the main beaches on the west coast.

BY TUK-TUK Within Phuket Town, tuk-tuks charge 100B to 200B even for the shortest trips, but they can get away with it because there's no alternative for short hops. They provide the most convenient way to get to the bus station or to Phuket Town's restaurants.

In the busy west-coast beaches, tuk-tuks and small Daihatsu minitrucks roll around town honking at any tourist on foot, especially in Patong. It is the only way to travel between beaches. Bargain hard and beware that these guys will try to eke every baht out of you. Expect to pay about 600B from town to the airport, 500B from town to Patong Beach, and 200B from Patong Beach to Karon Beach. At night, you'll have to pay through the nose, usually double the normal day rates. In early 2007, the beach and main roads began using one-way traffic, and transport prices have been rising further due to the longer distance.

BY MOTORCYCLE TAXI Motorcycle taxi drivers, identifiable by colored vests, make short trips within Phuket Town or along Patong Beach for fees as steep as 100B. Don't let them talk you into anything but short in-town rides, unless you're looking for a death-defying F1-style race along the switchback highways between beaches.

BY CAR You should be extremely cautious when driving yourself around Phuket. Roads between the main beaches in the west and connecting with Phuket Town across the center of the island are dangerously steep and winding, with more than a few hairpin turns and lots of unpredictable traffic. Having said that, renting a vehicle here makes much more sense than in, say, Ko Samui or Ko Chang, and road surfaces are generally in good condition. As in other parts of the kingdom, drivers pass aggressively, even on blind curves, and self-driving visitors should be defensive and alert at all times.

Avis (✆ **07635-1243**) and **Hertz** (✆ **07632-8545**) have counters at the Phuket airport.. Plan on spending around 1,400B per day for the cheapest four-door sedan. **Budget** (✆ **07620-5396** at the airport, 07629-2309 in Patong) charges similar rates. All international renters have sound insurance coverage available, which is highly recommended.

Inexpensive (but notoriously unsafe) Suzuki Caribbeans can be rented from almost all travel agents and from hotels at the beach areas. Prices start at 800B per day. Independent agents hang around under umbrellas along Patong Beach and offer great bargains, if you negotiate, but don't count on them having an insurance policy.

BY MOTORCYCLE Also along the Patong strip, the same car-rental guys will offer cheap bike rental. A 100cc Honda scooter goes for 150B to 200B per day, while a 400cc Honda Shadow chopper will set you back at least 600B per day. Significant discounts can be negotiated, if you plan to rent for a longer time. Wear your helmet, as police enforce fines of 500B for going without, and practice caution while driving.

Fast Facts Phuket

Banks Banks are located in Phuket Town, with many larger branches on Ranong and Rasada roads. There are bank branches of major Thai banks at Chalong, Nai Harn, Kata, Karon, and Patong beaches. **Money-changers** are located at the airport, in major shopping areas on each beach, and at most resorts. Banks offer the best rates. **ATMs** are now found all over Phuket.

Bookstores There are lots of bookshops to be found at the megamalls of Central Festival Phuket Town, and JungCeylon shopping mall, Patong. Also look for **The Books** at 53–55 Phuket Rd., Phuket Town (✆ **07622-4362**).

Hospitals There are three major private hospitals, all with English-speaking staff: **Bangkok Phuket Hospital,** at 2/1 Hongyok-Uthit Rd. (off Yaowarat Rd., in Phuket Town; ✆ **07625-4425**), has high-quality facilities. **Phuket International** (✆ **07624-9400**) is next to Big C Shopping Mall, outside Phuket Town. **Mission Hospital** also offers good medical services and is on Thepkasattri Road, Phuket Town (✆ **07621-1908**).

Internet Internet service is fairly easy to find on the island. Good connections can be found at small cafes and tour agencies at most beaches. In Patong, the best Internet cafes are farther away from the beach. Along Rat-U-Thit Road, in the center of Patong (a 5-min. walk east, away from the beach), you'll find 1B-per-minute service.

Police The emergency number for the **Tourist Police** is ✆ **1155** or 1699; for **Emergency Police,** dial ✆ **191**; for **Marine Police,** dial ✆ **07621-5438.**

Post Office The **General Post Office,** in Phuket Town (✆ **07621-1020**), is at the corner of Thalang and Montri roads.

SPECIAL EVENTS

If you are on Phuket around October/November, don't miss the **Vegetarian Festival.** The name is misleading—it is not about Animal Rights or being health conscious, but a Thai-Chinese tradition on Phuket (and now celebrated widely throughout southern Thailand) that corresponds with the Buddhist Lent. For 9 days, not only do devotees refrain from meat consumption, but many also submit to violent public acts of self-mutilation through piercing their bodies with long skewers or swords, and often walking over hot coals. The festival began as an act of penance to the spirits to help early inhabitants ward off malaria, but these days, the rituals are more for young men to prove themselves and for gaining merit and good luck. Early-morning processions follow through the streets of Phuket Town and major temples around the island, with onlookers clad in white for the occasion. During this time you can also feast on terrific vegetarian buffets at many restaurants on the island. See **www.phuketvegetarian.com** for exact dates and more info.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

If Phuket is your only destination in Thailand, you'll certainly want to get to some of the Muslim fishing villages, small rural temples, and Phuket Town. Outdoor activities top the list of things to do, and there's something for everyone (see "Exploring Phuket," later in this chapter).

More or less in the center of the island, the **Heroines' Monument** is a good place to get a taste of local history. It was erected in honor of two women who rallied the troops and saved the town from an attack by the Burmese in 1785. Locals frequently arrive to make offerings and prostrate themselves before the monument, making it more than a simple statue.

Thalang National Museum, just off Highway 402 beside the Heroines' Monument (✆ **07631-1426;** daily 9am–4pm; 100B), exhibits Phuket's indigenous cultures, the history of Thai settlements on Phuket, and crafts from the southern Thai regions as well as a 9th-century statue of the Hindu deity Vishnu—evidence of early Indian merchants visiting the burgeoning kingdom.

There are a few Buddhist temples on the island that are notable: The most unique is **Wat Phra Thong** (daily 6am–6pm), along Highway 402, in Thalang, just south of the airport. Years ago, a boy fell ill and dropped dead after tying his buffalo to a post sticking out of the ground. It was later discovered that the post was actually the top of a huge Buddha image that was buried under the earth. Numerous attempts to dig out the post failed—during one attempt in 1785, workers were chased off by hornets. Everyone took all this failure to mean that the Buddha image wanted to just stay put, so they covered the "post" with a plaster image of The Buddha's head and shoulders and built a temple around it.

The most famous temple among Thai visitors here is **Wat Chalong** (daily 6am–6pm). Chalong was the first resort on Phuket, back when the Thais first started coming to the island for vacations. Nowadays, the discovery of better beaches on the west side of the island has driven most tourists away from this area, but the temple still remains the center of Buddhist worship. The temple is on the Chaofa West Road, about 8km (5 miles) south of Phuket Town.

Sea Gypsies, or Chao Ley, are considered the indigenous people of Phuket. This minority group used to shift around the region, living off subsistence fishing, but commercial fishing interests and shoreline encroachment increasingly threaten their livelihoods. Related to the Malaysian Orang Laut people and the southern Thai Sakai tribes, Phuket and Phang Nga's Sea Gypsies form a few small settlements on Phuket island: one on Ko Siray (aka Ko Sire), east of Phuket Town, and another at Rawai Beach, just south of Chalong Bay. The villages are simple seashore shacks, with vendors selling souvenir shells. It's quite educational to visit these people and their disappearing culture; sadly, however, thanks to too many tourist handouts, be prepared also for pestering, dollar-hungry children.

2 WHERE TO STAY IN PHUKET

The hotels and resorts below are divided by beach area to simplify your choices on the island. Phuket is thick with development, so the list below is but a small selection, according to each beach. Nowadays, hotels do not always publish rack rates—instead the rates are governed by occupancy. In Phuket, the high-season peaks from December 15 to January 15, when rates are at their most expensive. If the rate here is marked "from," it means no rack rate is available, and the price has been based on Internet rates for high season. In low season, rates can drop 30% to 50%.

NAI HARN BEACH

Far to the south, Nai Harn Beach is a good escape, with a range of accommodations on offer. Adjacent beaches on the eastern side of the island, **Rawai** and **Chalong,** are also home to a few good, high-end resorts: **Evason Phuket & Six Senses Spa** (100 Vised Rd.; ✆ **07637-1400;** fax 07637-1401; www.sixsenses.com) is a luxury, family-friendly enclave and popular day-spa destination, with room rates starting at around 8,000B; and **Mangosteen** (99/4 Moo 7, Soi Mangosteen; ✆ **07628-9399;** fax 07628-9389; www.mangosteen-phuket.com) is a newer high-end choice, where rooms start at around 7,500B.

Expensive

The Royal Phuket Yacht Club ★★★ Perched above the northern edge of Nai Harn Beach, the Royal Yacht Club, now managed by Puravana, is one of the earliest luxury accommodations in Phuket, yet it still rivals nearly anything on the island for setting and comfort. The pagoda-style foyer overlooks terraced gardens overflowing with pink and white bougainvillea. Common areas have terra-cotta tiles and open views. Interiors are spacious and decorated with cheerful fabrics and tasteful furniture; bathrooms are huge, many with sunken tubs. All rooms have large balconies for viewing the beach and Promthep Cape.

23/3 Viset Rd., Nai Harn Beach, Phuket 83130 (above Nai Harn Beach, 18km/11 miles south of Phuket). ✆ **800/780-5733** or 07638-0200. Fax 07638-0280. www.phuket.com/yacht-club. 110 units. 3,950B–5,950B double (varies with view); 7,950B–24,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; extensive watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Just up the coastal road from the Royal Yacht Club are quaint seaside, forest bungalows at **Baan Krating Phuket Resort** (11/3 Moo 1, Viset Rd.; ✆/fax **07628-8264;** www.amari.com/baankrating/phuket). Affiliated with the reliable Amari group, this is a good value getaway. Rooms start at 2,800B.

Inexpensive

Orchid Garden Guest House (49/9 Soi Ruam Nana Chat, Rawai; ✆ **07638-8191**) is a lush oasis of poolside garden bungalows just 2km (1¼ mile) from Nai Harn Beach. Good value basic accommodations start at 500B.

KATA BEACH

One of Phuket's best tourist beaches, Kata is a wide strip of soft sand and rolling surf. Rent an umbrella, get a massage, or grab a kayak or surfboard and hit the waves (there's good surf May–Oct). Unfortunately, the best beachfront real estate is taken up by the sprawling **Phuket Club Med** (✆ **07633-0455**; www.clubmed.com), an all-inclusive, club-style resort, but the beach is open to all. After dark, Kata comes alive in the bars and music cafes along the beach roads.

Expensive

Katathani Hotel ★★★ The Katathani is the best option on the cul-de-sac of lovely Kata Noi Beach, a haven of quiet luxury. Rooms are contemporary, but cozy—all with large balconies and cozy indoor sitting areas. Wide, well-groomed lawns surround sizable

pools and lead to the graceful curve of the pristine cove. There is a nightly poolside buffet. The Katathani's best feature is that it is right on the beach and all rooms have good sea views. However, it is usually quite crowded and very popular with families, so this is not the resort for a quiet, romantic getaway.

14 Kata Noi Rd., Kata Noi Beach, Phuket 83100 (north end of Kata Noi Beach). ✆ **07633-0124.** Fax 07633-0426. www.katathani.com. 479 units. 9,000B–9,700B double; 11,000B–26,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 5 bars; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; golf course nearby; high-speed Internet; 5 outdoor pools; room service; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; scuba diving; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Mom Tri's Boathouse (aka "The Boathouse") and Villa Royale ★★★ At the quieter south end of Kata Beach, this small inn has been a longtime favorite with many returning visitors. More inn than resort, there's a real home-style feeling here. Comfortable, attractive rooms all face the sea, each with a terrace overlooking a courtyard pool and beach beyond; they're not particularly luxurious, but they are clean and adequate. For a very special stay, there's **Villa Royale,** a collection of extravagant suites. These huge rooms are perched over a steep cliff with stunning views of the sea and are sumptuously decorated in a unique mix of local materials: dark teak, mosaics of bamboo and coconut, black tile with stone inlay, and elegant textiles. The Boathouse Wine & Grill, the first-floor restaurant, is an old favorite for visiting connoisseurs; Mom Tri's Kitchen, the restaurant at Villa Royale, offers some of the best dining on the island. See "Where to Dine in Phuket" for information on both restaurants.

The Boathouse: 182 Koktanod Rd., Kata Beach, Phuket 83100 (north end of Kata Noi Beach). ✆ **07633-0015.** Fax 07633-561. www.boathousephuket.com. 38 units. 8,500B double; 16,500B suite; 25,000B villa. **Villa Royale:** 12 Kata Noi Rd., Kata Noi Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07633-3569.** www.villaroyalephuket.com. 27 units. 12,500B–25,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V for both. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; golf course nearby; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Sawasdee Village ★★ Finds Just a short walk from Kata Beach, you'll pass a small portico of stone with some Khmer statuary; walk in and you'll find a little Eden. Before reaching the rooms at the lush central courtyard, you'll walk past the hotel's restaurant, spa, and pretty garden. The garden surrounds a small pool with ornate fountains bordered with fine masonry and overflowing with greenery. Garden rooms are midsize and stylish, with canopy beds. Bathrooms are shower-only and not too small. The stunning new triple pool access **Baray Villas** are enormous, featuring a delightful blend of Arabic and Thai design and private butlers. There are elegant Thai touches throughout the compound, such as *salas* (pavilions) for relaxing and sliding doors that connect each room to the courtyard.

38 Katekwan Rd., Kata Beach, Phuket 83100 (down a small road north of the sprawling Club Med). ✆ **07633-0979.** Fax 07633-0905. www.phuketsawasdee.com. 54 units. 6,000B garden room; 17,000B Baray Villas. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; small outdoor pool; spa; free Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fridge, minibar, no phone.

Inexpensive

Kata Country House Kids Set in an attractive garden, this smart place offers decent-sized rooms with rustic furnishings at budget prices. The wood or concrete bungalows are the best bet, though standard and superior rooms in two-story blocks are also excellent value. The only downside is that it's tucked away behind Club Med and about a 10-minute walk from the beach, but there are two pools on-site, including one for kids.

82 Kata Rd., Kata Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07633-3210.** Fax 07628-4221. www.katacountryhouse.com. 88 units. 1,600B standard room; 2,600B bungalow. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Katanoi Bay Inn The Katanoi offers basic, motel-style rooms adjacent to the Katathani Hotel. Most rooms have balconies and firm beds. There is little in the way of facilities, but quiet Kata Noi Beach is just across the road for great snorkeling and watersports.

69/1 Kata Noi Rd., Kata Noi Beach, Phuket 83100 (Kata Noi is south of Kata Beach). ✆ **07633-3308.** Fax 07633-3545. www.katanoibayinn.com. 28 units. 1,200B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet cafe. *In room:* A/C (some), satellite TV, fridge, no phone.

KARON BEACH

Karon Beach is a popular, long stretch of beach lined with upper and midrange hotels and resorts. You'll find heaps of tailors, gift shops, bars, small restaurants and cafes, Internet service, local markets, and minimarts on the north end of the beach.

Expensive

Andaman Seaview Hotel ★★ Finds A real Karon Beach gem, Andaman Seaview's bright and airy public spaces are decorated in (Sino-Portuguese-inspired) hues of pale blue and white, flanked by ponds and a large central courtyard with a garden and meandering pool. Rooms overlook the pool area and are large and nicely appointed—they're better than most in this category. The hotel is charming in a way that is less about luxury than it is about the warm welcome and tidy appearance of the place. As a result, it pulls in a friendly crowd. The restaurant is a typical hotel coffee shop, but the poolside seats make for a great dining experience. In fact, I recommend taking as much advantage of the nearby beach as possible, including hitting up the waterside small spa.

1 Soi Karon, Kasron Rd. Soi 4, Phuket 83100 (along the main strip at Karon Beach). ✆ **07639-8111.** Fax 07639-8177. www.andamanphuket.com. 161 units. 6,700B superior double; 9,900B deluxe double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar (poolside); small fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Centara Villas Phuket ★★ Kids Formerly known as Central Karon Village Resort, the Centara Villas is one of the best resorts in the area. Set on its hillside perch on the north end of Karon Beach—along the crest of a hill between Karon and Relax Bay—the resort is a hillside hideaway of free-standing, luxury bungalows in tropical garden surrounds, overlooking the majestic crashing surf. The guest room decor is tasteful; bathrooms are done up in slick, polished concrete with skylights. The Cliff restaurant is tops (see "Where to Dine in Phuket," later in this chapter, for more info), and this self-contained gem has a friendly staff who can handle any eventuality. The outdoor waterfall pool overlooks the sea and is a good little escape; and their outdoor spa *salas* are a great place to learn the word *Sabai.* Thai cooking classes are on offer as well.

701 Patak Rd., Tambon Karon, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07628-6300.** Fax 07628-6316. www.centarahotelsresorts.com. 72 units. 6,500B–15,000B villas. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Karon Beach Resort ★★ This is the only Karon Beach property with direct beach access (from all others you'll have to walk across the road). Its beachside location, coupled with the classy decor, makes it a good, cozy choice. Rooms are midsize, with dark wood entrances, clean tile floors, and some Thai touches in the decor, but are most noteworthy for their orientation to the sea: Balconies are stacked in receding, semicircular tiers and

all look onto the pool below (first floor with direct pool access) or to the beach and sea beyond.

51 Karon Rd., Tambon Daron, Phuket 83100 (the south end of Karon Beach, just as the road bends up to cross to Kata). ✆ **07633-0006.** Fax 07633-0529. www.katagroup.com. 81 units. From 8,738B double; 16,519B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 outdoor pools; airport transfers; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Marina Phuket ★★ These simple cottages tucked in the jungle above a scenic promontory between Kata and Karon beaches are quite comfortable, and offer four room types. They are the best choice of the many choices nearby. Rates vary according to the view, but all have a jungle bungalow charm, connected by hilly walkways and boardwalks past the lush hillside greenery (keep your eyes peeled for wildlife). It is a hike down to the rocky shore and the swimming isn't great, but they have a good seaside restaurant, On the Rock (see "Where to Dine in Phuket," later in this chapter), and their in-house **Marina Divers** (✆ **07638-1625**) is a PADI International Diving School, which conducts classes, rents equipment, and leads good multiday expeditions. Heavy discounts apply during low season.

47 Karon Rd., Karon Beach, Phuket 83100 (on bluff at south end of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07633-0625.** Fax 07633-0516. www.marinaphuket.com. 92 units. $160–$300 double; $650 grand villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Mövenpick Resort & Spa ★★ Kids Occupying a huge area right opposite the center of Karon Beach, this Swiss-run, luxury hotel is ideal for those who want everything on-site. Rooms range from gardenview doubles in the main building to plunge pool villas done out with Balinese-style, thatched roofs, and massive, two-bedroom family suites. Guests have a choice of two attractive pools to swim in or lounge around, as well as several restaurants and bars scattered around the site. There's a play zone for kids and a spa, fitness room, and PADI diving courses, run by the reliable Euro Divers, for adults.

509 Patak Rd., Karon Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07639-6139.** Fax 07639-6122. www.moevenpick-phuket.com. 362 units. From 6,300B double; 8,730B plunge pool villa; 15,840B family suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 3 bars; airport transfers; children's center; fitness room; 2 outdoor pools; spa; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort & Spa ★★★ Set in 30 hectares (74 acres) of lawns and lush tropical gardens, the Hilton Phuket Arcadia is a modern, full-facility resort. Many of the stylish guest rooms overlook Karon Beach. Oceanview rooms are set in three wings. Upgraded rooms are luxurious, with cool Thai touches and great Thai contemporary furnishings throughout. The hotel sports a large spa village with 15 purpose-built spa villas connected by raised wooden platforms in a mellow, wooded glen at the heart of the resort. The in-house dining choices are great (go for the Thai restaurant), and everything about the place is classy, with snappy service that doesn't leave out a genuine Thai smile of welcome. There are no rack rates, but the below rates are a good overall guide.

333 Patak Rd., Karon Beach, Phuket 83100 (middle of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07639-6433.** Fax 07639-6136. www.hilton.com. 676 units. From 3,400B double; 11,400B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge bar w/live band; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; golf course nearby and putting green on-site; 3 pools; room service; spa; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

Inexpensive

Karona Resort and Spa ★ Tucked in a little side street where Karon and Kata beaches meet, the Karona Resort is a low-luxe find, with simple rooms surrounding a tiered central pool, all just a short walk from Karon Beach and the busy Kata strip. Deluxe rooms, in a block overlooking the pool, are worth the upgrade—you'll get a few more amenities, such as a safe. They also have good, affordable spa treatments, and the place is quite stylish and the service good for the price. Long-stay discounts apply.

6 Karon Soi 2, Karon Beach, Phuket 83100. ✆ **07628-6406.** Fax 07628-6411. www.karonaresort.com. 92 units. 1,700B–3,000B double; 6,000B–10,000B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

RELAX BAY

Le Meridien Phuket ★★★ Kids Tucked away on secluded Relax Bay, the Le Meridien features a lovely 549m (1,800-ft.) beach—with trained lifeguards—and 16 hectares (40 acres) of tropical greenery, making it one of the largest resorts on the island. It has numerous facilities—two big swimming pools, watersports, four tennis courts, a putting green and practice range, and a great fitness center—but its popularity makes it very busy. The resort caters to families, and there are lots of activities and a good day-care center that kids seem to love. The large building complex combines Western and traditional Thai architecture, and one of the advantages to its U-shape layout is that it ensures that 80% of the rooms face the ocean, with the lowest category getting a garden view. The modern furnishings in cheerful rooms are of rattan and teak, each with a balcony and wooden deck chairs. The seven restaurants on hand mean you'll have all kinds of dining choices.

29 Soi Karon Noi, Relax Bay, Phuket 83100. ✆ **800/543-4300** or 07637-0100. Fax 07634-0479. www.lemeridien.com. 470 units. 7,525B–22,575B garden superior–royal suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 7 restaurants; 3 bars w/games and live shows; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; kids' club; fitness center; golf driving range and on-site pro; 2 large outdoor pools; room service; spa; squash courts; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

PATONG

Once the popular haunt of the U.S. Navy's 9th Fleet, Patong built its nightlife on cheap sex and even cheaper beer. Today, it's Phuket's main tourist center, with plenty of cheap shopping, dining, clubbing—and prostitution. The main strip can be unpleasant for those not used to catcalling touts, who incessantly hassle passersby, accompanied by the constant beeping of tuk-tuks attempting to take tourists for a ride (in both senses). Though one of the hardest hit of Phuket's towns in the 2004 tsunami, the damage here was fairly limited (in international media reports, Patong was often confused with Khao Lak—3 hours' drive farther north—which was almost completely wiped out). With a few exceptions, mid- and high-range hotels on this busy strip were up and running soon after the tsunami, and prices are still rocketing. The town did lose some of its nicest budget options (such as Duangjit Villas and Seagull Guest House), however.

These days, sprawling Patong is a heap of what appears to be hastily built—or where the tsunami hit, hastily rebuilt—three-story concrete bunkers. Though some new landscaping has greatly improved a few parts of town—especially along the beach—once you move into the back streets, many are disappointed to find a tawdry mess of touts and tatty beer halls, interspersed with the odd smart resort or posh diner. It's not all bad: Patong has heaps of great eateries and some good accommodations options. Since the

opening of the swish new JungCeylon shopping mall and the glamorous five-star Millennium Resort next door, Patong has started to move away from its sad and sordid past. With more upscale bars and restaurants opening all the time, this trend seems set to continue.

Expensive

Amari Coral Beach Resort ★★★ The Amari Coral Beach stands on the rocks high above the southern end of busy Patong, well away from the congested beach strip, but close enough to dip into the mayhem. This seafront resort, from the very grand terraced lobby, guest rooms, and fine pool, is oriented to the incredible views of the majestic bay below. The rooms have ocean tones, cozy balconies, and all the comforts of home. There is live music nightly and the hotel's Italian restaurant, La Gritta (see "Where to Dine in Phuket," later in this chapter), is a great lazy option. Don't miss The Jetty for sunset cocktails. Overall, this is a secluded and atmospheric choice.

2 Meun Ngern Rd., Phuket 83150 (south and uphill of Patong Beach). ✆ **07634-0106.** Fax 07634-0115. www.amari.com. 197 units. 6,300B–8,300B double; from 10,300B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa; outdoor lighted tennis court; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Burasari Resort ★★ Welcoming staff make the Burasari a great choice if you prefer it chic and petite; just don't expect a sea view. This teeny-weeny resort-styled hotel has been squeezed into the middle of a *soi,* just off the main drag, and styled as a contemporary hanging-garden resort. The stylish rooms, set amid a narrow courtyard of waterfalls, pools, and greenery, are delightful, fusing a blend of contemporary and rustic Thai design, but the basic rooms are rather small. If size matters to you, opt for one of the Mood Collection rooms, which are more spacious. For this convenient location, just a stroll from the beach and madness of the main street, it represents good value. There's also stellar dining, courtesy of a restaurant branded by the 1980s Brit TV chef Keith Floyd.

18/110 Ruamjai Rd., Patong, Phuket 83150. ✆ **07629-2929.** Fax 07629-2930. www.burasari.com. 186 units. 6,000B–8,000B double; 15,000B–25,000B elite; 25,000B Mood Collection. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; lobby lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness room; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

The Diamond Cliff Resort & Spa ★★★ The Diamond Cliff is a gleaming hilltop resort at the northern end of Patong Beach, with rooms commanding great ocean views. The grounds are attractively landscaped and common areas are luxurious. An irregular shuttle service covers the distance down the hill and into town—or it's a long (and hot) stroll to central Patong. You may want to get wheels. The selection of facilities is ample and the place is in tip-top shape. Check their website for significant discounts, when booking directly.

284 Prabaramee Rd., Patong, Phuket 83150 (far north end, on the road to Kamala Beach). ✆ **07634-0501.** Fax 07634-0507. www.diamondcliff.com. 333 units. 8,300B double; 10,300B–45,000B suites and villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 7 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 3 outdoor pools; room service; spa; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Holiday Inn Resort Phuket ★★ Kids What distinguishes this place from the others on the busy front is that it's well equipped for families and has some creative cost-saving services. The central pool areas have elaborate fountains and a fun meandering

pool suited to kids of all ages, and there are kids' programs and a kids' club; plus there's a babysitting service, when parents want some time off. There are lots of family activities and excursions to choose from. Family Suites, with separate "kids' rooms," come with jungle- or pirate-themed decor, a TV with a video player and PlayStation, and stocked toy boxes; some have bunk beds. The hotel also has a self-service launderette, so you don't have to pay hotel laundry prices. Also unique is the hotel's minibar scheme—rooms have just a bare fridge, but guests can pick out supplies from a small convenience store in the lobby and have them delivered for not much more than standard minibar prices.

52 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach, Phuket 83150 (Patong Beach strip). ✆ **800/HOLIDAY** (465-4329) or 07634-0608. Fax 07634-0435. www.holiday.phuket.com. 369 units. 7,200B–11,000B double; 11,000B–24,000B suite/villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; kid's club; fitness center; high-speed Internet; 4 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer.

Merlin Beach Resort and Patong Merlin ★★★ The Merlin company owns two massive compounds in Phuket, with one in central Patong, right on the seafront, and the other, more choice property, 3km (1¾ miles) south on scenic Merlin Beach. Both are popular with Australian tourists and feature attractive common areas, spacious open-plan lobbies with oversize rattan furniture, and rooms with balconies and views of the pool or seaside. Both facilities also offer stunning lagoon-style swimming pools, each with a pool bar, and some rooms even have private "swim-up" access. There are nicely manicured gardens throughout. The all-inclusive digs mean guests have access to facilities ranging from a fine fitness club, watersports, game room, gym, sauna, and snooker. The Merlin Beach Resort, with its private beach access, is the better of the two, with newer rooms just a hitch higher in standard. That resort is somewhat remote from the action of Patong (it lies on a small horseshoe of sand in an isolated bay—the beach is all coral, though, not for swimming), but, for some, that's its greatest asset.

Patong Merlin: 44 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach, Phuket 83150 (on Patong strip, near south end of town). ✆ **07634-0037.** Fax 07634-0394. www.merlinphuket.com/patongmerl. 386 units. From 7,000B double; 14,000B–22,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; high-speed Internet; 3 pools; room service; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Merlin Beach Resort: 99 Muen-Ngoen Rd., Tri-Trang Beach, Patong, Phuket 83150 (3km/1¾ miles south and west of Patong). ✆ **07629-4300.** Fax 07629-4310. www.merlinphuket.com. 414 units. From 8,000B superior double; from 22,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar and lounge; babysitting; small fitness center; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi, 2 outdoor pools; room service; sauna; spa; tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Millennium Resort Patong, Phuket ★★★ This low-rise, ultracontemporary hotel is the first truly international five-star chain to set up a resort on the Patong strip. And what a change it makes. Two completely separate wings (named "Beachside" or "Lakeside") fan out from a beautiful atrium, linked by a grand staircase to a good-sized ballroom. Upstairs on the rooftop area is the pool and spa level, facing the lush mountains. Clean, modern lines and slick designer touches, such as the "glass cube" bathrooms and muted, earthy tones in each guest room, bring a touch of smart, urbane comfort to the town, yet the tropical landscaping reminds guests that they're just a short walk to the sea. Catering to more upscale leisure and business travelers, the Millennium sets a new benchmark for Patong. Because it's annexed to the JungCeylon mall, there are dozens of eating options close by, in addition to the stylish restaurants and bars within the resort.

199, Rat-U-Thit, 200 Pee Rd., Patong, Phuket 83150 (within JungCeylon shopping mall). ✆ **07660-1999.** Fax 07660-1986. www.millenniumhotels.com. 418 units. 7,500B–11,500B double; 10,500B–23,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

Horizon Patong Beach Resort & Spa ★ This midrange hotel in the middle of busy Patong provides a compact little oasis with cozy, affordable rooms and friendly, efficient service. The grounds feature two pools, and most rooms are right at the pool's edge. Plain tile rooms are clean, with hard beds and simple tile bathrooms (shower only). The place attracts lots of individual European travelers, and the vibe is fun—without being too wild.

64/39 Thaweewong Rd., Soi Kep Sap, Patong Beach, Phuket 83150. ✆ **07629-2526.** Fax 07629-2535. www.horizonbeach.com. 160 units. 4,000B–5,200B double. From 6,000B suites. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

The downside of Patong's cleanup after the 2004 tsunami for budget travelers is that most places that needed to rebuild have also upgraded their facilities, so there are now virtually no inexpensive hotels left on this beach. If you need to find cheap lodgings, you'll fare better in Phuket Town or on the beaches farther south at Kata and Karon. Of the budget accommodations that remain, the following offer reasonable value.

Andatel Patong (41/9 Rat-U-Thit, 200 Pee Rd.; ✆ **07629-0480;** www.andatelhotel.com) is one good central option, with rooms around 1,000B to 2,000B; reservations are necessary in high season. **Kelly's Hotel** (47/1 Nanai Rd.; ✆ **08703-12154,** mobile; www.kellyshotelphuket.com) is a bit of a trek from the beach but has helpful management, a small pool, and free Wi-Fi.

THE NORTHWEST COAST

Surin Beach

Also known as Pansea Beach, this area has coconut plantations, steep slopes leading down to the beach, and small, private coves dominated by some of the most exclusive hotels on the island.

Very Expensive/Expensive

Amanpuri ★★★ Amanpuri has long been billed as the address of note for international celebrities; however, by today's standards of luxury and style, some may find it falls short, considering the high prices it demands. The teak-filled rooms are certainly masterfully designed in a traditional Thai style, with teak and tile floors, sliding doors, and well-chosen antiques. But they are a tad small, in light of the oversized villas now on offer, and can be musty in the rainy season; some may also find the ubiquitous concrete decor too stark. These things apart, the Aman style is still omnipresent: The spacious villas are sumptuously decorated, and their private pools are all extremely elegant; private *salas* are perfect for romantic dining or secluded sunbathing. The Aman Spa offers six large spa suites, a grand herbal steam bath, and a sauna.

Surin Beach Rd., Cherng Talay, Thalang, Phuket 83110 (north end of cove). ✆ **07632-4333.** Fax 07632-4100. www.amanresorts.com. 70 units. $925 garden pavilion; from $1,100 seaview pavilion; from $2,200 2-bedroom villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center;

 high-speed Internet; golf course nearby; pool; room service; spa; squash courts; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, CD/DVD player, fridge, minibar.

Ayara Hilltops ★★★ Fancy hillside suites give guests at this ultracontemporary resort the impression of being suspended high above the cliffs, but there are snappy golf carts to take you to your rooms, and, once there, you won't want to leave. Accommodations come in just two types: villas or suites, many with private plunge pools; plus their dining is tops. It all makes for a good little honeymoon hideaway.

125 Moo 3, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay, Thalang, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07627-1271.** Fax 07627-1270. www.ayarahilltops.com. 48 units. 8,300B–25,900B room/suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; health club; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

The Chedi Phuket ★★★ Like its august sister resort and immediate neighbor (Amanpuri), the Chedi commands an excellent view of the bay and has its own private stretch of sand. It's perhaps a more kid-friendly option than Amanpuri, plus the site enjoys shady wooden walkways under the trees. From the exotic lobby, with columns and a lily pond, to sleek private bungalows, it is one of the most handsome properties on the island. True, the quality comes with a big price tag, but this romantic getaway has all the details down pat. Each room is a thatched minisuite with a lovely private sun deck and top amenities. The black-tile swimming pool is large and luxurious. The fine service here caters to the likes of honeymooners and celebrities, and everyone is treated like a VIP. While it may not be as outwardly impressive as its ritzy neighbor, the Chedi is quiet, comfortably informal, and unpretentious, with fine dining options.

118, Moo 3, Surin Beach Rd., Cherng Talay, Thalang, Phuket 83110 (next to the Amanpuri). ✆ **07632-4017.** Fax 07632-4252. www.ghmhotels.com. 108 units. From 17,000B hillside cottage; from 21,000B superior cottage; from 26,000B deluxe cottage; from 31,000B beach suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; kids' club; outdoor pool; room service; spa; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Twin Palms, Phuket ★★★ The brainchild of a Swedish entrepreneur, this gorgeous Thai contemporary resort is not as flashy as its neighbors, but nonetheless has sublime charm and a timeless, yet cutting-edge style. A stunning Thai-inspired open-rafter lobby with glassy stone floors makes way to a vast tropical Water Garden, the centerpiece of the property. Guests have use of an excellent spa and highly acclaimed restaurant, Oriental Spoon (sister to Kuppa, in Bangkok), as well as an extensive wine room. An additional 21 residences (all with private pools) opened in 2008. Less pricey are the airy Lagoon rooms and suites, some of which have terraces that go straight into the water. The room decor uses numerous Thai references, such as sleek dark wood floors and local art and crafts (including rugs made by the Mae Fah Luang crafts charity). Ultra peak season is December 19 to January 10, after which rates fall slightly until March.

106/46 Moo 3, Surin Beach Rd., Cherng Talay, Thalang, Phuket 83110 (opposite the golf course). ✆ **07631-6500.** Fax 07631-6599. www.twinpalms-phuket.com. 97 units. From 9,300B deluxe palm room; from 11,300B deluxe lagoon room; from 18,800B 1-bedroom lagoon junior suite; from 42,200B 2-bedroom penthouse residence. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar.

BANG THAO BAY (THE LAGUNA RESORT COMPLEX)

Twenty minutes south of the airport and just as far north of Patong Beach on the western shore of Phuket, this isolated area is Phuket's high-end, "integrated resort" of five properties that share the island's most top-rated facilities. Among them you'll find world-class

health spas, countless restaurants, and the island's best golf course. The grounds are impressively landscaped, and the hotel properties are scattered among the winding lagoons, all navigable by boat. The best thing about staying here is that you can dine at any of the fine hotel restaurants, connecting by boat or free shuttle, and be charged on one simple bill at whatever resort you choose. The three below are the best, but also consider the original **Laguna Beach Resort** (✆ **07632-4352;** www.lagunabeach-resort.com), with a similar high standard of rooms and services (popular with groups). In the high season, expect standard double rooms (with two breakfasts) to cost 8,000B; for the lowest category of suite (with breakfast), you'll pay 18,000B.

Very Expensive

Banyan Tree Phuket ★★★ Banyan Tree is possibly Phuket's most famous hideaway for honeymooners, sports stars, and high society. Private villas with walled courtyards, many with private pools or Jacuzzis, are spacious and grand, and lavishly styled in teakwood with outdoor bathtubs. The main pool is truly impressive—a free-form lagoon, landscaped with greenery and rock formations—with a flowing water canal. A small village in itself, the spa provides a wide range of beauty and health treatments in luxurious rooms—you can request a private massage in your room or in outdoor pavilions. The resort can arrange barbecues at your villa, or you can dine at the Tamarind Restaurant, which serves delicious, light, and authentic health food. The Banyan Tree garners many international awards, especially for its Green Initiative and eco-friendly stance. In high season, peak surcharges apply.

33/27 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay District, Amphur Talang, Phuket 83110 (north end of beach). ✆ **800/591-0439** or 07632-4374. Fax 07627-1463. www.banyantree.com. 150 units. 22,600B–45,000B villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; golf course; outdoor pool; room service; spa; 3 outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Dusit Laguna Resort ★★★ Kids The Dusit hotel group has some fine properties in Thailand, and the Dusit Laguna is no exception. Opt for a deluxe room with a balcony and ocean view, and you'll find rates are reasonable. Suites are large and luxurious, while the new oceanfront pool villas are veritable palaces, occupying almost 300 sq. m (3,229 sq. ft.). The hotel offers four excellent restaurants; of note is their quaint Italian restaurant, La Trattoria, serving authentic Italian cuisine in a chic but laid-back pavilion decorated in cool whites and blues. The well-landscaped gardens have an especially delightful waterfall and an excellent pool. The grounds open onto a wide white-sand beach flanked by two lagoons. Facilities for families are excellent, with a whole gamut of entertainment, including computer games.

390 Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay District, Phuket 83110 (south end of beach). ✆ **07636-2999.** Fax 07636-2900. www.dusit.com. 254 units. 8,500B–14,000B double; from 20,000B suite; from 36,000B villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; fitness center; pitch and putt on premises and golf course nearby; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket ★★ Kids This is a sprawling, luxury campus of two- and three-story pavilions. Rooms are quite large, with tiled floors, cozy sitting areas, and large balconies; some bathrooms have sunken tubs. The hotel design carefully traces the natural lines, coves, and jetties of its surrounding lagoon, and the area is quiet and private. A fair-size pool meanders through the resort and there are good amenities for kids of all ages, from a kids' club (called VIK, or Very Important Kids) to beach games

and sailboat rental at the lagoon. With its professionalism and an enormous range of outlets, plus casual eateries and cafes (including a good bakery), the Sheraton is a fine, familiar choice.

10 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay, Talang, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07632-4101.** Fax 07632-4108. www.starwoodhotels.com. 423 units. $215–$295 double; $415 villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar and lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; kids' club; fitness center; golf course nearby; free-form outdoor pool; room service; spa; 2 outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment/rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

LAYAN BEACH

Phuket Pavilions ★★ "No tan lines" is the catchphrase at this intimate escape, by which guests should understand that they can enjoy total privacy within the grounds of their spacious pool villa. The resort is situated on a hill just north of the Laguna complex, and while it's a bit of a trek from the beach, most guests will settle for lounging around the luxurious pavilions. Furnishings are supermodern and comfortable, and each pavilion has its private pool within stepping distance of the bedroom, as well as fantastic views out to sea. Buggies are on hand to run guests to the Plantation Club restaurant or 360° Lookout bar, and spa treatments are offered in specially constructed rooms beside each private pool. Another 20 suites will become available (at slightly cheaper rates) in late 2010.

31/1 Moo 6, Cherng Talay, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07631-7600.** Fax 07631-7601. www.pavilions-resorts.com/phuket. 30 units. 18,700B pool villa; 32,400B 3-bedroom pool villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, kitchenette, spa, Wi-Fi.

NAI THON & NAI YANG BEACHES

Nai Thon and **Nai Yang Beaches** form part of the **Sirinath National Marine Park,** which was established to protect offshore coral reefs and turtles that nest in this region. These casuarina-fringed stretches of sand are good for leaving the crowds behind, but be warned that the region is isolated, and, apart from a few upmarket resorts, there are few facilities in this remote corner of the island.

Nai Yang is known for its annual release of hatchling sea turtles into the Andaman Sea. Mature sea turtles weigh from 100 to 1,500 pounds and swim the waters around Phuket, and though the law is supposed to protect them from fishermen and poachers, who collect their eggs from beaches, their numbers are dwindling. If not for the efforts of international volunteer groups such as **Naucrates** (www.naucrates.org), which has spent years working out of a small conservation center at Ko Phra Thong near Khuraburi, about 100km (62 miles) north of Phuket, these creatures would probably have become extinct already. As it is, the number of Olive Ridley turtle nests has plummeted in recent years, and Thai scientists predict that they will be extinct in Thailand by 2011. Leatherback turtles fare even worse, and are rarely seen in this part of the world these days.

Nai Thon is just south of Nai Yang (closer to Laguna) and is home to a handful of resorts.

Nai Thon

Very Expensive

Trisara ★★ Well away from the fray, Trisara is a small boutique property some 15 minutes from the airport. The resort affords a high level of comfort in a clutch of private, contemporary pool villas right at the seaside. There's a high price tag attached to its luxury villas, which are priced according to proximity to the sea. It's definitely not as classy as The Chedi, nor as celebrity-friendly as The Banyan Tree, but it would like to

think it outdoes both; at times, you'll rub up against a distinct attitude here. Still, its private spaces are picturesquely flamboyant, with pools overlooking the blue water below—it should appeal to those who enjoy the isolation.

60/1 Moo 6, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay, Thalang, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07631-0100.** Fax 07631-0300. www.trisara.com. 39 units. $835–$1,240 room/suite; from $2,950 2-bedroom villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; bikes; health club; high-speed Internet; private outdoor pool; seaside public pool; room service; spa; tennis courts; watersports equipment/rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fax, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Nai Yang

Expensive

Indigo Pearl Resort ★★★ One of the earliest resorts on Phuket, the Pearl Village was destroyed in the 2004 tsunami and, after extensive restoration, was reborn as Indigo Pearl Resort. Its reincarnation was the work of landscape designer and Bangkok resident Bill Bensley and a team of local artisans. The revamped resort is a creative masterpiece. On the periphery of the National Park, the hotel is isolated from the ravages of overdevelopment characterizing the rest of touristy Phuket. The facilities are excellent, especially for families—with rooms ranging from pavilions and villas to exquisitely furnished suites. The one drawback is that you're out in the sticks here, but, for rest and recreation, the resort is perfectly self-contained and close to nature. The resort was a winner of the 2007 *Condé Nast Traveler* "Best New Resort" award.

Nai Yang Beach and National Park, Phuket 83104 (5 min. south of the airport). ✆ **07632-7006.** Fax 07632-7015. www.indigo-pearl.com. 277 units. From 7,500B double; 14,500B villa; from 16,900B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; bikes; kid's club; lounge; fitness center; international golf course nearby; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; outdoor lit tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

MAI KHAO BEACH & THE FAR NORTH OF PHUKET

Mai Khao is a wide sweep of beach on the northeastern shore close to the airport. It is Phuket's longest beach and is the site where sea turtles lay their eggs during December and January. The eggs are coveted by Thai and Chinese people, who eat them for the supposed life-sustaining power. Efforts are being made to assist these glorious animals and protect their potential hatchlings, but unfortunately it seems a case of too little, too late.

Very Expensive

JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa ★★★ Relaxation. If ever a resort fully embodied this ethos, it is the Marriott. From the moment you set foot in this beachside paradise, you are encouraged to let the troubles of the outside world slip away. Set on a desolate and windswept stretch of Mai Khao Beach, the relaxing sounds of birds and flowing water follow you wherever you step. Comfortable spots to curl up and read are around every corner, from daybeds on stairwell landings to reading nooks in each beautifully appointed room. It is a 30-minute drive to Phuket Town, but the resort facilities are complete and few guests will need to leave, unless it's to take a bike ride to the next village or a kayak ride with nearby eco-outfit John Gray. Service at the JW Marriott is impeccable and the dining exemplary.

231 Moo 3, Mai Khao, Talang, Phuket 83110. ✆ **07633-8000.** Fax 07634-8348. www.marriott.com. 265 units. 8,900B–10,500B room; from 18,400B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 7 restaurants; 3 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; kids' club; executive level rooms w/private check-in; fitness center; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; room service; extensive spa; 2 tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

PHUKET TOWN

Most just pass through the island's commercial hub, but Old Phuket culture abounds in the many Sino-Portuguese homes and unusual architecture. It's well worth a look, especially if Phuket Island is your only destination (see "Where to Dine in Phuket," below, for dining options here).

Expensive

Cape Panwa Hotel ★★ Just 10 minutes outside Phuket Town, set on a former beachfront coconut plantation, Cape Panwa Hotel is one of Phuket's best-kept secrets and a haven of tranquillity. European-run, but with fabulous Thai staff, the hotel is popular with families and honeymooners who come for the relaxed charm and island ambience. All rooms, villas, and suites face the Andaman Sea and are set in lush tropical gardens. Dinner, or sunset cocktails at Panwa House—a grand Sino-Portuguese mansion—is a highlight after a day spent combing Old Town streets or relaxing on the beach.

27, Moo 8, Sakdijej Rd., Cape Panwa, Phuket 83000. ✆ **07639-1123.** Fax 07639-1177. www.capepanwa.com. 246 units. From 4,950B double; from 8,500B suite; from 18,000B villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; bar; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; tennis court; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

The Metropole Just around the corner from the Royal Phuket City Hotel, the Metropole is a fine business hotel. Public spaces are all spit-and-polish (though not especially grand), and the rooms are large and fully appointed (if bland), with good black-and-white tile bathrooms. For relaxation, there's a swimming pool on the fourth floor and a massage service, plus a fitness center to keep guests in shape.

1 Soi Surin, Montri Rd., Phuket Town 83000. ✆ **07621-5050.** Fax 07621-5990. www.metropolephuket.com. 248 units. 3,200B–3,800B double; from 6,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; bar; small fitness center; high-speed Internet; pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Royal Phuket City Hotel ★★ For such a small town as Phuket, this hotel is surprisingly cosmopolitan. A true city hotel, Royal Phuket's facilities include one of the finest fitness centers going, a full-service spa with massage, a large outdoor swimming pool, and a very professional executive business center. Above the cavernous marble lobby, guest rooms are smart, done up in contemporary hues and style. Views of the busy little town below pale in comparison to the beachfront just a short ride away. The Red Onion Restaurant serves international cuisine, the streetside Cafe 154 offers great coffee and cakes, and the Atrium Lounge cocktail bar is one of the smartest in town.

154 Phang Nga Rd., Amphur Muang, Phuket 83000 (located to the east of Phuket Town, across from the intercity bus terminal). ✆ **07623-3333.** Fax 07623-3335. www.royalphuketcity.com. 251 units. 2,000B–2,600B double; from 5,000B suite (discounts available). AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; bar; airport transfers; babysitting; fitness center; golf course nearby; spa; outdoor pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

3 WHERE TO DINE IN PHUKET

From tip-to-toe, north to south, it takes about an hour to drive all of Phuket, but the availability of hired tuk-tuks, hotel transport, or even self-drive vehicles means that for dining and nightlife, you can choose from any of the many options on the island. The

beach areas in the west are chockablock with small eateries or smart hotel restaurants. In the throbbing Patong strip, culinary options stretch from fast-food outlets clustered around the beach to snazzy designer diners and Asian chains.

KATA & KARON

The busy road between Kata and Karon (as well as the many side streets) are crammed with small cafes and restaurants serving affordable Thai and Western food. Stop by **Euro Deli** (58/60 Karon Rd.; ✆ **07628-6265**) for a good sandwich or a coffee. Also note the outdoor beer bars and travelers cafes on the far southern end of Kata Beach, just behind Club Med; these places rock till late and are good spots to grab a quick bite, local style. On the north end of Karon, stop by **Karon Café** (526/17 Soi Islandia Park Resort, off Patak Rd.; ✆ **07639-64217;** www.karoncafe.com) for good, casual Western dining (such as great Aussie steaks). For a more expensive treat, **Joe's South** (Kata Gardens on Kata Noi Rd.; ✆ **07628-5385**) is a fabulous fine-dining spot in a great setting.

Expensive

The Boathouse Wine & Grill ★★★THAI/INTERNATIONAL So legendary is the Thai and Western cuisine at the Boathouse that the management arranges cooking lessons from its chef. The Boathouse also has an excellent selection of international wines—nearly 400 labels. **Mom Tri's** is a veritable island institution, and **Boathouse Regatta** and **Oasis on the Sea** are the latest upscale ventures here. The former serves gourmet French and Thai dishes accompanied by gentle jazz in the early evening, while the latter serves innovative Mediterranean cuisine from its seaside perch.

The Boathouse Inn, 114 Patak Rd., Kata Beach. ✆ **07633-0015.** www.momtriphuket.com. Reservations recommended during peak season. Main courses 520B–1,950B; seafood is sold at market price. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–11:30pm.

On the Rock ★★ THAI/SEAFOOD Part of the Marina Phuket (see "Where to Stay," earlier in this chapter), this little unassuming restaurant serves excellent Thai cuisine on a scenic deck high above the south end of Karon Beach. Try the Seafood Basket, a medley of grilled and fried local seafood. The staff is friendly and the restaurant is a great choice for a candlelit evening.

47 Karon Rd., Karon Beach (on bluff at south end of Karon Beach Rd.). ✆ **07633-0625.** www.marinaphuket.com. Main courses 500B–1,000B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10:30pm.

Moderate

The Cliff ★ INTERNATIONAL High above Karon on the rise heading toward Patong, The Cliff is located in Centara Village (formerly Central Karon Village Resort). Serving delicious contemporary Thai and Mediterranean dishes from atop their hilltop perch, the restaurant offers a great escape from town. Try the thinly sliced tuna for an appetizer. They also have good grill items, from Aussie tenderloin to roast lamb, and a long list of excellent Thai curries, all artfully presented.

701 Patak Rd., Tambon Karon. ✆ **07628-6300.** www.centarahotelsresorts.com. Main courses 250B–800B. AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30–10:30am, 11am–4pm, and 6:30–10:30pm.

Ratri Jazztaurant ★★ THAI Perched high at the top of a precipitous hill slope, Ratri is worth the hideously steep 1km (⅔-mile) climb for their classic Thai dishes, most of which pack an explosively spicy punch. An enthusiastic live jazz band plays late into the night. The music is great, but if you are looking forward to some dinnertime conversation, it makes that hard (you should go before sunset, in that case). There's a full wine

cellar and cigar bar (so nonsmokers beware). The somewhat surly service is the only drawback.

Patak Rd., Kata Hill (behind Big One convenience store). ✆ **07633-3538.** www.ratrijazztaurant.com. Main courses 200B–500B. MC, V. Daily 3pm–late; live band 8:30pm–late.

PATONG

Since the opening of the **JungCeylon** shopping mall (p. 256) in 2007, dining options in Patong have not just broadened, but smartened up radically. In addition to the usual low-cost Western food and drink chains (Subway, Starbucks), there are now some smarter places such as the Singaporean restaurant chain **Indochine,** all packed into this gargantuan air-conditioned mall.

Most of the small seafront *sois* offer pricey Thai and Italian food—in often expat-run places. If you have a hankering for seafood, head to the southern end of the beach drag (Thaweewong Rd.). What was once just a collection of wooden shacks 10 years ago is now a long strip of chic diners. Though this road is plagued with touts, armed with menus and imploring tourists to choose their restaurant, this end of it is slightly less intense, so stand your ground. Pick a menu that you like the look of, and order from a wide selection of fresh seafood that is displayed on ice at the front.

One popular little breakfast place is **Sabai-Sabai** (100/3 Thaweewong Rd.; ✆ **07634-0222**); the name means "relaxed," and, indeed, it is so, just a laid-back storefront in a small *soi* off busy Patong Beach Road. Or try the little restaurant **Orchid** (78/304 Thaweewong Rd., Soi Perm Pong; ✆ **07634-0462**), on the next *soi* south, for good, affordable Thai and European dishes.

Scruffy Murphy's (Soi Bangla; ✆ **07629-2590**) is a popular Irish pub (see "Phuket After Dark," later in this chapter) that also serves good pub grub and fry-ups (great hangover chow). Also look for little **Zen** (✆ **07629-3053**), a popular Thai sushi chain with a busy outlet on the main beach road in Patong. You'll find lots of international fast-food chains, overpriced coffee, and, of course, the obligatory 7-Eleven here, too.

Expensive

Baan Rim Pa ★★ ROYAL THAI In a beautiful Thai-style teak house, Baan Rim Pa has dining in a romantic indoor setting or with gorgeous views of the bay from outdoor terraces. Among high-end travelers, this restaurant serving Royal Thai cuisine is one of the most popular stops on the island, so be sure to reserve your table early. The piano bar features live music every evening. The owner of Baan Rim Pa has opened up a few other restaurants next door on the cliffside, including **Joe's Downstairs,** for cool cocktails and tapas (✆ **07634-4254**), and the Italian restaurant **Da Maurizio** (✆ **07634-4079**). He also runs **Joe's South** at Kata Noi.

223 Kalim Beach Rd. (on the cliffs just north of Patong Beach). ✆ **07634-0789.** www.baanrimpa.com. Reservations necessary. Dishes 345B–645B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

La Gritta ★ ITALIAN La Gritta is notable for not just its food but also its stunning views of Patong Beach, which unfurls in a long silver strip off into the distance. It's well away from the fray, yet only a 15-minute walk northward to the end of the main beachfront road up on the headland. The walk will let you work up an appetite for the restaurant's extensive menu and excellent wine list. The colorful *antipasto misto* makes a great shared appetizer, while main dishes include plenty of seafood, such as sea bass, prawns, or scallops—though there are imported steaks, veal, and salmon, too. For dessert, don't miss the chocolate Amaretti custard.

At the Amari Coral Beach Resort & Spa, 2 Meun-ngern Rd. (beyond Patong Beach). ✆ **07634-0106.** Main courses 580B–1,320B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–11:30pm.

Moderate

Pan Yaah THAI This good escape from busy Patong dishes up some real Thai home cooking. The restaurant is a wooden deck overlooking the bay some 2km (1¼ miles) north of central Patong, with perhaps the best view in town. The menu is classic Thai, with some one-dish meals, such as fried rice or noodles, but is best enjoyed with friends sharing a number of courses, such as spicy *tom yum* soup with prawns, stir-fried dishes, and whole fish cooked to order. Prices are reasonable and service is friendly and laid-back.

249 Prabaramee Rd., Patong (2km/1¾ miles north of Patong along the coast). ✆ **07634-4473.** Main courses 180B–300B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Patong Seafood Restaurant SEAFOOD Take an evening stroll along the lively strip next to the beach and you'll find dozens of open-air seafood restaurants displaying their catch of the day on ice out front, accompanied by a pushy tout. This one is pretty typical of the lot, but has a long-established reputation. Like all the neighbors along here, it offers a selection of local fish such as grouper *(garoupa),* lobster, squid, prawn, shellfish, and sometimes crab. Service is on the ball, and they're always popular—so head here early to avoid the crowds.

98/2 Thaweewong Rd., Patong Beach. ✆ **07634-0247.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 180B–850B; seafood at market prices. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

KAMALA BAY

Rockfish THAI/INTERNATIONAL It's worth making the short journey from Patong Beach (or indeed from any other beach on Phuket) to sample this stylish ocean-front restaurant, which features different menus for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Try the Thai marinated chicken breast with Caesar's salad (300B) for lunch, or crispy white snapper filet, cauliflower risotto, asparagus, and yellow curry sauce (650B) for dinner. Finish it off with a slice of white chocolate cheesecake (250B) and a sip on a cleverly named cocktail while admiring the sweeping view of the bay.

33/6 Kamala Beach Rd. (opposite the temple at the south end of the bay). ✆ **07627-9732.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 250B–900B. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–1am.

BANG TAO BAY (THE LAGUNA RESORT COMPLEX)

The many hotel restaurants of the five-star properties in the Laguna Complex could fill a small guidebook of their own. You can't go too wrong in any of the hotels, with **The Banyan Tree Phuket** (p. 243) topping the lot for sheer style and enormous variety (try the pan-Asian delicacies at **Saffron,** or delicious Mediterranean fare at **Watercourt**). One restaurant just outside the complex is worth mentioning; it's where all the hotel managers eat when they get out of work.

Tatonka ★★ INTERNATIONAL Billed as "Globetrotter Cuisine," dining at Tatonka is indeed a foray into the realm of nomadic gastronomy. The owner is himself a well-traveled chef (check out his résumé written on the bathroom wall). Dishes here reflect those travels, a creative fusion of Mediterranean and Pacific-Rim cuisine. Ask the waiter for a recommendation and enjoy.

382/19 Moo 1, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherng Talay (at the entrance of the Laguna Resort, in Bang Tao Bay). ✆/fax **07632-4349.** www.phuket.com/tatonka. Main courses 275B–560B. MC, V. Thurs–Tues 6–10:30pm.

CHALONG BAY & RAWAI

A good bet for fresh seafood is in the far south of the island at Chalong Bay's **Kan Eang Seafood** (9/3 Chaofa Rd., Chalong Bay; ✆ **07638-1323**). You'll find whole fish or Phuket lobster (a giant clawless langoustine) just fresh from the ocean. If you've rented a car, a ride down this way makes for a fun day out. The **Drunken Monkey** (21/6 Moo 4, Viset Rd., Rawai; ✆ **0810-878742**) is a great gay-friendly eatery for home-cooked meals and Sunday roast; Londoners Martyn and Ian are wonderful hosts. **Nikita's Café Bar** (✆ **07628-8703**) on the Rawai seafront is a cool seaside hangout for coffee and sundowners, and decent food too. Down Nai Harn Beach way, look out for **Los Amigos Cantina** (✆ **08947-29128,** mobile), next to Nai Harn Lake, for excellent Mexican. The **Breakfast Hut** (✆ **07628-9823**), on the same road, serves tasty Western food.

PHUKET TOWN

Though quite a long ride from the West coast beach areas, a night out in Phuket Town is worth it for some fine meals and a taste of local culture. One place to visit is the slickly styled **Siam Indigo** (8 Phang Nga Rd.; ✆ **07625-6697**), which has fabulous Thai cuisine as well as steaks, cocktails, and a good range of wines.

Ka Jok See ★★ Finds THAI A truly special find, Ka Jok See is a smart and intimate European-styled venue set in an old Sino-Portuguese house. This classy Thai restaurant run by Khun Lek has been here for years and hides mysteriously behind a façade dripping with ivy. Patronized by well-heeled local professionals, it's so well known, there is no sign (look for the small Khana Sutra Indian restaurant next door). Though its name means "stained glass," the decor opts for ceilings of huge wooden beams, giant plants, and candlelight instead. A great selection of music sets the stage for a romantic evening, one that's well worth a venture from the beach.

26 Takua Pa Rd., Phuket Town (a short walk from central Rasada Rd.). ✆ **07621-7903.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 350B. MC, V. Tues–Sat 6:30–10:30pm.

Salvatore ★ ITALIAN This is the real thing: huge salads, pasta, and great pizza in a large air-conditioned dining room at the town center. The wine list is excellent, and, if you're lucky, Salvatore himself may drop in on your table. Commendable pasta, lasagna, steaks, and a range of daily specials are all made with loving care, plus many of the wines are imported. Don't miss the lemon tartufo, which melts in your mouth and goes well with a stiff black coffee.

15 Rasada Rd., Tambol Taladyai (central Phuket Town). ✆/fax **07622-5958.** Main courses 290B–750B. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 11:30am–2:30pm and 6–11pm; Sun 6–11pm.

Watermark Bar Restaurant ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Not to be confused with the Banyan Tree's restaurant of the same name, the Watermark is an expat hangout serving a good choice of mostly fusion seafood dishes overlooking the lagoon, just north of Phuket Town. Try the seared *ahi* tuna appetizer, with a pasta or grilled main course, or some of the deliciously spicy contemporary-styled Thai dishes.

Phuket Boat Lagoon, 22/1 Moo 2, Thepkasattri Rd., Amphur Muang (10 min. north of Phuket Town; 30 min. from the west coast beaches). ✆ **07623-9730.** www.watermarkphuket.com. Main courses 220B–950B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

4 EXPLORING PHUKET

You can spend a lot of time on Phuket and still not do everything. Thanks to years of resort growth, a host of activities are on hand, appealing mostly to those who like a bit of action. The beachfront areas are full of tour operators, each vying for your business and offering similar trips (or copycat tours). Listed below are the most reputable firms, but ask lots of questions before signing up for anything, so there are no surprises.

BEACHFRONT WATERSPORTS

A 10-minute **parasailing ride** is about 800B at most beaches. You'll also find **Hobie Cats** for around 600B per hour, as well as **windsurf boards** for 200B per hour. On Patong, there are no specific offices to organize these activities, just small operators with hand-painted signs usually hanging around under umbrellas—bargain furiously.

Jet skis are technically illegal, but alas, as you'll hear all along the length of Patong, plenty of people are willing to spend their money on screaming up and down the beach on a gasoline-belching scooter. (Most of the noisier watersports activities are concentrated along Patong Beach.) Accidents are now so common between swimmers or divers and jet skis (some resulting in amputations or death) that areas are now being cordoned off from these (wholly unecological) aquatic toys.

You'll find small **sailboats and kayaks** for rent along all of the beaches. Kata is a good place to rent a kayak and play in the waves for 200B per hour, but ask about the strong riptides along this dangerous coast.

The hottest new beach activity is **kiteboarding** or **kitesurfing,** and a few companies, such as **Kiteboarding Asia** (✆ **08159-14592;** www.kiteboardingasia.com), offer 3-day introductory courses for around 10,000B. The best beaches for kiteboarding on Phuket are Rawai and Chalong in the south, and the best months for wind are January/February and July/August.

DAY CRUISING & YACHTING

The turquoise waters of the Andaman Sea near Phuket are every city dweller's dream. Every December, Phuket hosts the increasingly popular **King's Cup Regatta,** in which almost 100 international racing yachts compete. For more information, check out www.kingscup.com.

For a different view of gorgeous Phang Nga Bay, book a trip aboard one of Asian Oasis's three luxury Chinese junks, the ***June Bahtra 1, 2,*** and ***3.*** Full-day trips include lunch and hotel transfers. Passage on an all-day cruise in stunning Phang Nga Bay, to the likes of the (now totally ruined) "James Bond" Island, starts from 3,700B per person, depending on the number in a group (alcoholic beverages are not included). Book through their website, www.asian-oasis.com.

There are more and more options for chartering yachts in Phuket. Contact **Asia Marine** for details (c/o Phuket Boat Lagoon, 20/8 Thepkasattri Rd., Tambon Kohkaew, Phuket 83200; ✆ **07623-9111;** www.asia-marine.net) or **Sunsail Asia Pacific** (Phuket Boat Lagoon, 20/5 Moo 2, Thepkasattri Rd., Phuket 83200; ✆ **07623-9057;** www.sunsailthailand.com).

Many of the high-end resorts, such as the **Amanpuri** (✆ **07632-4333;** www.amanresorts.com), have their own fleets of pleasure boats for in-house guests, or can make arrangements.

FISHING

Blue Water Anglers are deep-sea fishing experts with well-equipped boats. They'll take you out for marlin, sailfish, swordfish, and tuna, and also have special night-fishing programs; but be warned that if you're new to the sport, it isn't cheap—the trip will set you back thousands of baht. Stop by at 35/7 Sakdidet Rd., Phuket Town; or call ✆ **07639-1287.** Or look up www.bluewater-anglers.com.

GOLFING

There are some superb golf courses on Phuket attracting enthusiasts from around the globe. Golf package tour companies offer some great discounts on greens fees; try **Phuket Golf** (www.phuket-golf.com) or, alternatively, give **Phuket Golf vacation** (www.phuketgolfcourse.com) a go. Below is a selection of some of the best courses on the island.

- **The Blue Canyon Country Club,** 165 Moo 1, Thepkasattri Rd., near the airport (✆ **07632-8088;** fax 07632-8068; www.bluecanyonclub.com), has two courses, the Canyon Course, a par-72 championship course with natural hazards, trees, and guarded greens, and the Lakes Course, which features water hazards on 17 holes (greens fees: 4,000B Lakes Course; 5,600B Canyon Course).
- **Laguna Phuket Golf Club,** 34 Moo 4, Srisoonthorn Rd., at the Laguna Resort Complex on Bang Tao Bay (✆ **07627-0991;** fax 07632-4351), is a par-71 championship course with many water features (greens fees: 3,800B; guests of Laguna resorts receive a discount).
- **Mission Hills Golf Resort & Spa,** 195 Moo 4, Phla Khlok (✆ **07631-0888;** fax 07631-0899; www.missionhillsphuket.com), is the island's newest international course. It's designed by Jack Nicklaus and offers ocean views over 18 holes and a 9-hole bayview, night course (greens fees: 3,800B).
- An older course, the **Phuket Country Club,** 80/1 Vichitsongkram Rd., west of Phuket Town (✆ **07631-9200;** fax 07631-9206; www.phuketcountryclub.com), has beautiful greens and fairways, plus a giant lake (greens fees: 3,500B).

HORSEBACK RIDING

A romantic and charming way to see Phuket's jungles and beaches is on horseback. The **Phuket Laguna Riding Club,** 394 Moo 1, Bangtao Beach (✆ **07632-4199**), welcomes riders of all ages and experience levels, and can provide instruction for beginners and children. Prices start at 600B per hour.

SEA KAYAKING

Phang Nga Bay National Park, a half-hour drive north of Phuket, hosts great trips by sea kayak. The scenery is stunning, with limestone karst towers rising from the bay of more than 120 islands. These craggy rock formations were the backdrop for the James Bond classic *The Man with the Golden Gun.* Sadly, due to unfettered commercialism, they are completely overrun with teeming tour groups dropping litter and packing the narrow paths. Sea kayaks are a perfect way to avoid these crowds and explore the many breathtaking caves and chambers that hide beneath the jagged cliffs. All tours include the hour-plus ride to and from Phang Nga, the cruise to the island area, paddle-guide, kayak, and lunch.

John Gray Sea Canoe ★ (124 Soi 1, Yaowarat Rd., Phuket Town 83000; ✆ **07625-4505;** http://phuketdir.com/johngrayseacanoe/index.htm) is the most respected, low-impact, eco-tour operator and a pioneer of sea kayaking in the region. At the time of this

update, their main trip was a "*hong* by starlight" tour (3,950B adults, 1,975B children), which runs from midday to 10pm and includes kayaking in the *hongs* and a seafood buffet in Phang Nga Bay. Their day trip is now only available for private charter (29,500B for a group of four). A guide will paddle you dexterously in and out of the caves—which is frustrating if you actually like paddling—but the caves are stunning, and there's free time for paddling on your own later. Multiday and more adventurous "self-guided" tours are also offered.

The folks at **Paddle-Asia** (9/71 Rasdanusorn Rd., Tambon Rasada, Phuket 83000; ✆ **08189-36558;** www.paddleasia.com) make Phuket their home and do trips throughout the region, with a focus more on custom adventure travel, not day junkets. They have great options for anyone from beginner to expert, and on any trip you'll paddle real decked kayaks, not inflatables. A highlight is their trip to **Khao Sok National Park** (see "Day Trips from Surat Thani," in chapter 9), a 3-day adventure in which you may even spot amazing jungle wildlife. Due to tragedies in this park in rainy season, Thai authorities are considering closing it during storms, so stay abreast of the weather, especially in monsoon season. In Phuket, Paddle Asia can arrange offshore trips to outlying islands, kayak surfing on Kata Beach, or custom-made adventures ranging as far as Laos.

SCUBA DIVING

Because it's world renowned for its access to nearby **Surin** and **Similan Islands,** scuba diving is a huge draw to the island of Phuket. Thailand is one of the most affordable places to get into this hugely rewarding sport, yet it is not without its risks—safety is paramount when choosing your operator. When you are selecting a company, always check that it is PADI certified. Many of the storefront operations are just consolidators for other companies (meaning you get less quality care and pay a fee to a middle man), so ask if they have their own boats and make sure you'll be diving with the folks you meet behind the counter. Also check about the ratio of divers to instructor or dive master; anything more than five-to-one is not acceptable, and it should be more like two-to-one for beginner courses.

Below are a few of the best choices in Phuket. All these companies can arrange day trips to the nearby coral wall and wrecks, as well as overnight or long-term excursions to the Similan Islands (also PADI courses, Dive Master courses, or 1-day introductory lessons and Open Water certification). Multiday Open Water courses can begin at around 11,900B.

- **Dive Asia** is a highly reputable firm on Phuket that appeals to serious divers. Their main office is at 24 Karon Rd., Kata Beach (✆ **07633-0598;** fax 07628-4117; www.diveasia.com). Dive packages include 4-day PADI certification courses, while full-day trips around Phuket run around 3,500B (for experienced divers only), including 2 or 3 dives.
- The folks at **Scuba Cat** ★ (94 Thaweewong Rd., Patong; ✆ **07629-3120;** www.scubacat.com) have one of the best things going in Patong. With some 10 years of experience, a large, friendly expatriate staff, and their own fleet of boats, Scuba Cat is very much a professional outfit, offering the full range of trips for anyone from beginner to expert (and at competitive prices). You can't miss the small practice pool in front of their beachside Patong office.
- **Sea Bees Diving** (1/3 Moo 9, Viset Rd., Chalong Bay; ✆/fax **07638-1765;** www.sea-bees.com) is another good outfit offering day trips.
- **Sunrise Diving** (198/12 Rat-U-Thit Rd., Patong; ✆ **07629-2052;** www.sunrisediving.net) provides competitive services; they also have their own boats.

SNORKELING

In the smaller bays around the island, such as Nai Harn Beach or Relax Bay, you'll come across some lovely **snorkeling** right along the shore. For the best coral just off the shoreline, trek up to **Nai Yang Beach** for its long reef in clear, shallow waters. Nearby Raya Island is popular, and many venture farther to the **Similan Islands** or **Ko Phi Phi.** The best times to snorkel are from November to April before the monsoon comes and makes the sea too choppy. Almost every tour operator and hotel can book day trips by boat that include hotel transfers, lunch, and gear for about 1,500B per person.

TREKKING & OTHER ACTIVITIES

To experience the wild side of Phuket's interior, try a **rainforest trek** through the Khao Phra Thaew Wildlife & Forest Reserve in northeast Phuket; it's still relatively rich with tropical trees and wildlife. The park trails were recently upgraded and the reserve also houses the **Gibbon Rehabilitation Project** (see "Back to Nature," below, for info).

Then there's **elephant trekking,** a perennial favorite for children and adults. Elephants are not indigenous to Phuket, so what you get here is more-or-less a pony ride, but arguments over captive elephant-tour programs aside, the elephants are reasonably well cared for here, and the tour cost goes toward their enormous feed bill. **Siam Safari Nature Tours** (45 Chaofa Rd., Chalong; ✆ **07628-0116;** www.siamsafari.com) offers a variety of tours. Their "four-in-one safari" lasts about 6 hours and includes an elephant trek through jungles to rubber estates, watching monkeys pick coconuts, a ride on a buffalo cart, and then a cruise on a junk in Chalong Bay. Prices are 2,250B for adults and 1,550B for children.

River Rovers (✆ **07628-0420;** www.riverrovers.com) is a great way to see old Phuket and nature at its finest; this cruise takes in mangrove swamps with monkeys clambering in the branches, fish and mussel farms, and the chance to do a bit of exploring by kayak, with a fabulous fresh seafood lunch at a floating restaurant.

BACK TO NATURE

Sirinath National Marine Park, 90 sq. km (35 sq. miles) of protected land and sea (mostly the latter) in the northwest corner of the island, offers a peaceful retreat from the rest of the island's tourism madness. There are two fantastic reasons to make the journey out to the park. The first is for Phuket's largest coral reef in shallow water, only 1,000m (3280 ft.) from the shore. The second is for the rare chance of spotting the endangered Olive Ridley turtles that once came to nest every year between November and February. The Park headquarters (✆ **07632-8226;** www.dnp.go.th) is a very short hop from Phuket Airport off Highway 402.

At bars, restaurants, and guesthouses around Thailand, but particularly on Phuket, caged or drugged **lar gibbons** provide a dubious form of entertainment to tourists, many of whom are completely ignorant of the abuse these endangered creatures endure. These fragile primates are poached as pets when young, and caged until they are mature—and become aggressive. At this point they are sold to a bar, dressed in children's clothes, and fed amphetamines to stay awake at night (when they are normally asleep). Imprisoned by their owners by day, by night, they are fed a diet of cigarettes and whisky—all in the name of "entertaining" the tourists. Some visitors unwittingly exacerbate the problem by paying to have their photo taken with a captive gibbon; some simple advice is–don't do it.

Many gibbons develop psychological problems and become extremely menacing, which is when the owners want to get rid of them. **The Gibbon Rehabilitation Project,** off Highway 4027, at the Bang Pae waterfall, in the northeastern corner of the island

(✆ **07626-0492;** www.gibbonproject.org), cares for mistreated gibbons, and volunteers are always welcome. Guides offer tours of the facility, open daily from 10am to 4pm. Admission is free, but donations are expected (ask for a receipt).

The **Phuket Aquarium** (✆ **07639-1126;** www.phuketaquarium.org), at the **Phuket Marine Biological Center** (51 Moo 8, Sakdidet Rd.), seeks to educate the public about local marine life and nature preservation. There's also a science and nature trail along the adjoining coast. Most of the signs throughout are in Thai but it is still worth a trip. It's open daily 8:30am to 4:30pm, and admission is 100B for adults, 50B for children.

Phuket Butterfly Garden & Insect World, Soi Phaneung, Yaowarat Road, Tambon Rasada, Phuket Town (✆ **07621-0861;** www.phuketbutterfly.com), breeds hundreds of gorgeous butterflies in a large enclosed garden. There are plenty of chances for photos. It's open daily from 9am to 5pm; adult admission is 300B, and children from 4 to 10 pay 150B.

You'd never think seashells were fascinating until you visit the **Phuket Shell Museum** (12/2 Moo 2, Viset Rd., Rawai Beach, just south of Chalong Bay; ✆ **07638-1266;** admission 200B adults, 100B for kids). Billed as "the largest shell museum in the world," it's actually not the quantity that amazes, but the quality; don't miss the world's biggest golden pearl. As always, the gift shop sells a range of tempting high-quality shell products; however, these days, any eco-savvy traveler will be well aware that the retail shell industry is depriving a sea creature of a home, and that such countries as Australia actively prohibit their import. The museum is open daily from 8am to 6pm.

SPAS

If you've come to Phuket to escape and relax, there's no better way to accomplish your goal than to visit one of Phuket's spas. Even the smallest resort now offers full spa services (of varying quality), and you can find good, affordable massages along any beach and in storefronts in the main tourist areas.

For luxury treatments, the most famous and exclusive facility here is **The Spa at The Banyan Tree, Phuket** ★★★. In its secluded garden pavilions, you'll be treated regally; you may choose from many types of massage, body and facial treatments, or health and beauty programs. To make reservations, call ✆ **07632-4374** or visit www.banyantreespa.com. Expect to pay for the luxury, in the region of 4,000B for a 2-hour facial, or from 6,500B for a 3-hour package, which combines several treatments.

Another high-end resort, in the farthest southeast part of the island, **Evason Phuket** makes for a great day-spa experience. Its **Six Senses Spa** is at 100 Vised Rd., Moo 2, Rawai Beach, Phuket 83130 (✆ **07638-1010;** fax 07638-1018; www.sixsenses.com), and it's as renowned, in both standards and price, as any other top spa on the island.

Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort and Spa (Karon Beach; ✆ **07639-6433;** www.hilton.com) is home to one of the finest spas on the island, a Thai village complex of individual spa suites connected by a meandering boardwalk; it's a great choice for luxury treatments.

Mom Tri's Spa, the Villa Royale, Kata Noi Beach (12 Kata Noi Rd.; ✆ **07633-3569;** www.villaroyalephuket.com), is home to a chic spa area at their luxury hilltop resort, with well-trained staff.

Patong Medical Spa (behind Patong Hospital, 57 Sainamyen Rd.; ✆ **07634-4855;** http://phuketthaispa.com/patongmedicalspa) is a more affordable day spa with trained Thai practitioners offering uniquely Thai treatments such as herbal steam, foot reflexology, or the soothing, hot herbal poultice, called *prakob* in Thai. A 1-hour Thai massage begins at 700B.

SHOPPING

Patong Beach is the center of handicraft and souvenir shopping in Phuket, and its main streets and small *sois* are teeming with storefront tailors, leather shops, jewelers, and ready-to-wear clothing boutiques. Vendors line the sidewalks, selling everything from bras to batik clothing, arts and crafts, northern hill-tribe silver, and of course the usual fake brands and dodgy CDs—their importation is now illegal in many countries. Vendors everywhere in Patong have the nasty habit of hassling passersby; don't respond to any greeting, and you may get away tout-free. Most prices are inflated compared to Bangkok or other tourist markets in Thailand, but some hard bargaining can get you the right price. Many items, such as northern handicrafts, are best if purchased closer to the source, but if this is your only stop in Thailand, everything is cheap compared to the West—you might as well stock up.

To avoid rip-off merchants, take a stroll to **JungCeylon** ★ (181 Rat-U-Thit Rd.; ✆ **07660-0111;** www.jungceylon.com), a megamall devoted to shopping and entertainment, whose entire basement (curiously called "That's Siam") is filled with a great range of local handicrafts from all over Thailand. JungCeylon also hosts some of the popular teenager label boutiques, sport shops, fast-food outlets, and fashions, as well as popular Asian brands. It's a much more relaxed and hassle-free shopping experience than most here.

The island's other malls consist of the humongous **Central Festival** (✆ **07629-1111**), about 10km (6¼ miles) inland from Patong and 3km (1¾ miles) inland from Phuket Town on Chalermprakiet Road. **Big C** (✆ **07624-9444**), a midrange mall, is next door; nearby **Tesco Lotus** (no phone) is unlike the British supermarket in everything but name; it sells mostly Thai-oriented consumer and food items.

Visit **Phuket Town** for local arts, a few whacky boutiques, and some reputable antiques stores, as well as **Robinson** department store (no phone) and **Ocean Mall** market. For good-quality shopping suggestions and a great walking map of the Old Town, see www.artandcultureasia.com. The ***Art & Culture South*** guide, available around town, offers pointers on where to buy antiques and original art, from the **Artists' Village** at Nai Harn to the galleries of Surin Beach and beyond.

One of the best tailors in the area is **Peach,** in Patong (9/8 Prachanukhro Rd.; ✆ **07634-5614**).

PHUKET AFTER DARK

Patong is the center of nightlife on the island, though it serves up the same old sordid stuff as Patpong, in Bangkok; you'll find plenty of bars, nightclubs, karaoke lounges, snooker halls, and dance shows with pretty sleazy entertainment. While some wide-eyed teenagers or washed-up barflies may find it titillating to trawl the hundreds of hostess bars, many people, especially couples with families, may find these venues a complete turnoff. Lit up like a seedy Las Vegas in miniature, the Patong bar areas are filled with (often underage) working girls and boys in pursuit of wealthy foreign men. Since the Vietnam War, prostitutes (some of which are transsexuals) have plied Patong's girlie bars. See p. 48 in chapter 3 for info on the risks associated with going with any commercial sex worker (CSW) during your visit.

Many hotels realize their guests may not want to barge their way through smoke-filled go-go bars, so they duly put on nightly **Thai dance shows,** which, if done well, can be mesmerizing; check with the resorts listed earlier for info.

For those who don't head for the bars (which are open pretty much all night), Patong's endless markets and restaurants usually stay open till 11pm around the main beach towns, especially Patong.

Bars & Clubs

Scruffy Murphy's (✆ **07629-2590**), 50m (164 ft.) from the beach, down Bangla Road in Patong, is an obligatory Irish pub with mostly young Aussie or Brit tourists revving up to make a night of it. There's often live music or sports on TV. **Paradise** complex, in Soi Paradise (off Rat-U-Thit Rd.; no phone), is a gay-friendly zone of funky bars, clubs, and cafes. The classy **Seduction Disco** (off Soi Bangla; no phone) usually has fabulous DJs and dancing, whatever your persuasion.

Joe Kool's, at Ramada Resort, Karon Beach (568 Patak Rd.; ✆ **07639-6666;** www.joekoolsphuket.com), is a family-friendly diner and entertainment venue with live music most nights. Near the center of the island, on the road between Kata Beach and Phuket Town, is the **Green Man** (82/15 Moo 4, Patak Rd., Chalong; ✆ **07628-1445;** www.the-green-man.net), a half-timbered English pub, filled with local expats and tourists. There's live music Tuesdays and Thursdays, and it's open until 1am.

Phuket Town also offers a few worthy music clubs. Check out **Timber Hut,** for live bands in a Wild West setting, after 10pm (118/1 Yaowarat Rd.; ✆ **07621-1839**), and **Phukana Wine & Music** (6 Mealuan Rd.; ✆ **07623-4495**), an intimate club with an excellent live dance band.

Jazz fans should make the trip down to Kata Beach to visit **Ratri Jazztaurant** (p. 247), the only real jazz venue on the island.

Live Entertainment

It's kitschy, it's exhilarating, and, heck, it's *so* lifelike: **Dino Park Mini Golf** ★ (✆ **07633-0625;** www.dinopark.com) is a great night out for bored teenagers or unruly whippersnappers who will love the Jurassic Park background of giant, roaring mechanical dinosaurs and (very lifelike) erupting volcanoes. Not only is it a good place to let them loose, but adults can even enjoy some grown-up time in the outdoor Flintstone-inspired bar and restaurant while the kids hit the links. Find the course in the heart of Kata Beach, adjoining the popular Marina Phuket Resort (see "Where to Stay," earlier).

The island's premiere theme attraction, **Phuket Fantasea** (✆ **07638-5000** for reservations; www.phuket-fantasea.com), is as touristy and kitschy as the huge billboards and glossy brochures around town make it seem. The show—set in a theme park filled with glitzy shops—is at Kamala Beach, north of Patong, on the coastal road. After a huge buffet in the palatial Golden Kinaree Restaurant, visitors proceed to the Palace of the Elephants for the show. As one might expect, the prices are inflated; the souvenirs, an exercise in haute tackiness; and the suppers, so-so (you can at least save your stomach by buying a show-only ticket). That said, the 75-minute spectacle itself is enormously entertaining. You can buy a ticket (including transport) in most any hotel lobby or travel agency, so check for deals. The park opens at 5:30pm, the buffet begins at 6:30pm, and the show starts at 9pm (in high season, Dec–Jan, there are occasionally extra performances at 5 and 7pm). Tickets for the show are 1,500B for adults and children alike, while dinner and transfer fees add another 700B for adults and 500B for children.

On the south end of Patong, crowds of tourists pack the long-established transsexual extravaganza **Simon Cabaret,** 8 Sirirach Rd., Patong Beach (✆ **07634-2011;** www.phuket-simoncabaret.com). There are two evening shows nightly, at 7:30 and 9:30pm.

This glitzy entertainment features scantily clad beauties (yes, they really are all male, or male transsexuals), who lip-sync their way through popular Asian and Western pop songs. If you enjoy theatrical high camp, it can be a lot of fun and its burlesque humor draws busloads (especially Asian grannies). The dance numbers have pretty impressive sets and costumes and the numbers are interspersed with light comic acts. The cost is 700B for adults and 500B for kids.

The **Phuket Playhouse** presents a slick show nearer the heart of Patong (120 Rat-U-Thit Rd.; ✆ **07634-1500;** http://phuketplayhouse.com). It's similar to Simon Cabaret (see above), but it includes female dancers as well as transsexuals. The dinner (choose from Thai, Thai vegetarian, or Western set menus) is the best dinner-show meal on the island. Cocktails and the show will set you back 700B, while dinner and the show costs 1,500B. Performances are at 8:30pm and 10pm nightly, except Sundays.

5 SIDE TRIPS FROM PHUKET: KHAO LAK & OFFSHORE ISLANDS

KHAO LAK

There are lots of adventure tour operators and travel agents on Phuket, all offering a variety of day and overnight trips. Phang Nga Bay is popular for adventure travel; see "Day Trips from Surat Thani," in chapter 9, for information about great trips to **Khao Sok National Park.**

Just over an hour from the northernmost tip of Phuket, in the province of **Phang Nga,** the coastal town of **Khao Lak** was the area hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami. Now almost entirely rebuilt, today it's a burgeoning eco-tourism destination with some magnificent resorts, some new, and some wholly rebuilt. Popular with the Euro and Scandinavian crowds, today it attracts nature lovers who come to go bird-watching and soak in its waterfalls. It's an ideal jumping-off point for visits to pristine dive spots around the **Ko Similan** ★★★ and **Ko Surin National Marine Park** ★★★ (the best months to visit are Dec–May; the park is closed May–Oct).

Comprising nine islands, the **Similan Islands** are rated in the top-10 best dive sites in the world for the stunning arrays of unspoiled corals, sea fans, and sponges, as well as angelfish, parrotfish, manta rays, and sometimes white-tipped sharks. Numerous local dive operators offer short (approx. 3 hr. by speedboat) or long trips to these regions from Thap Lamu Pier, 8km (5 miles) south of Khao Lak. For bungalow or camping accommodations on the islands, contact Similan National Park (local office ✆ **07659-5045**). A similar style of basic accommodations is also available in **Ko Surin National Park** (✆ **07647-2145**), which comprises five islands with some of the best shallow water corals. Whale sharks are known to frequent these waters, which, in the past, were once the exclusive domain of Phuket's indigenous people, the Sea Gypsies.

Boats leave from Khuraburi Pier, north of Khao Lak, with a journey time of 4 hours to the islands. From here, fans of marine life can take a day trip to isolated **Ko Phra Thong** to visit the island's conservation center. Manned (only in dry season) by an international team of experts and volunteers, it surveys and protects rare turtles and the region's disappearing, yet ecologically vital, mangroves. See www.naucrates.org for info.

Another stellar outfit, the **Ecotourism Training Center (ETC),** is a nonprofit organization set up by a dynamic American, Reid Ridgway, to provide long-term career training

to tsunami-affected youth. Established in 2005, the Khao Lak program trains local Thais in sustainable community tourism and diving skills to PADI Dive Master and Instructor level. It now offers trips to interested divers and visitors. For more information, see www.etcth.org.

Other local attractions include miles of peaceful white-sand beaches, elephant trekking, temple tours, white-water rafting, and jungle treks. Visit **Khao Lak Land Discovery** (21/5 Moo 7, Petchkasem Rd., Khao Lak; ✆ **07648-5411**) for information about such activities.

Where to Stay

Many visitors who are tired of Phuket's high prices and full-on party vibe head up here for long or short breaks, and the range of accommodations is constantly growing.

Very Expensive

The Sarojin ★★★ This multiple-award-winning property set on 4 hectares (10 acres) of beachside land offers the opportunity for either complete relaxation or adventures in the forest or out at sea with the aid of its "imagineers"—personal concierges intent on satisfying guests' every whim. The suites and residences are sumptuously equipped and surrounded by lush gardens, while the spa and dining options are truly top class.

60 Moo 2, Kukkak, Takuapa, Phang Nga 82190. ✆ **07642-7900.** Fax 07642-7906. www.sarojin.com. 56 units. AE, MC, V. 15,000B garden residence; 20,000B pool residence; 23,250 suite. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; mountain bikes; fitness center; nearby golf course; pool; spa; nearby tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach & Spa Resort ★ Kids Occupying an enormous stretch of beach to the north of town, this large resort offers plenty of choices for activities and dining. It is especially fun for kids, as there is both a special beach for them, located beside the award-winning spa, and a Penguin Club, where supervisors organize treasure hunts, dancing classes, and face painting, among other activities. The villas are particularly appealing, with spacious lounges, private pools, and personal butlers.

9/9 Moo 1, Kukkak, Takuapa, Phang Nga 82190. ✆ **800-656-469** or 07642-7500. Fax 07642-7575. www.starwoodhotels.com. 243 units. AE, MC, V. From 7,500B deluxe; from 10,000B suite; from 15,000B villa. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; bar; penguin club (for children); fitness center; 3 pools; spa; 2 tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, high-speed Internet.

La Flora Resort & Spa ★ This stylish resort is the ideal place for a romantic getaway, with an attractive garden, a good swimming beach, and excellent service. Rooms are fitted out in contemporary Asian style, and most have balconies with daybeds. The two-bedroom villas right on the beach feature Jacuzzis and outdoor rain showers. Check their website for current offers for packages of a few days, and for information on available Thai cooking and boxing classes.

59/1 Moo 5, Kukkak, Takuapa, Phang Nga 82190. ✆ **07642-8000.** Fax 07642-8029. www.lafloraresort.com. 138 units. AE, MC, V. From 5,700B deluxe room; from 9,000B villa. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; mountain bikes; fitness center; 2 pools; spa; tennis court; watersports equipment. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

There are plenty of midrange options in Khao Lak. Apart from the recommendation below, it's worth considering **Palm Galleria Resort** (27/102 Moo 2, Kukkak, Khao Lak, Phang Nga 82190; ✆ **07642-7000;** www.khaolakpalmgalleria.com) or **Apsaras Beach**

Resort & Spa (45 Moo 2, Kukkak, Khao Lak, Phang Nga 82190; ✆ **07658-4444;** www.apsarasresort.com), both on scenic Pakarang Beach, about 15km (9⅓ miles) north of Khao Lak.

Baan Krating (Value) Like its property at the southern tip of Phuket, this small resort of thatched bungalows is wonderfully secluded among dense vegetation at the edge of Khao Lak–Lam Ru National Park. As it is set on a cliff above a rocky beach, it was one of the few places that did not have to completely rebuild after the tsunami. Rooms don't have all the bells and whistles of the top-end resorts, but all are comfortably furnished and service is of a high standard, making this resort a good value.

28 Moo 7, Kukkak, Takua Pa, Phang Nga 82190. ✆ **07648-5188.** Fax 07648-5187. www.amari.com/baankrating/khaolak. 24 units. MC, V. From 2,400B deluxe room. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

On the budget end, there are beachside jungle bungalows at **Similana Resort** (23/7 Moo 1, Kukkak, Khao Lak, Phang Nga 82190; ✆ **07642-0166**), with rooms starting at 1,500B. **Khao Lak Banana** (Soi Bang La On; ✆ **07648-5889;** www.khaolak.phang-nga.org) is another good deal, with fan rooms at 700B and rooms with A/C running 1,000B; a pool and Wi-Fi are bonus features.

Where to Dine

In addition to the many hotel restaurants on hand, there are countless dining venues in town, though several places close during the low season (May–Oct). Among the best, try **Joe's Steak House** (56 Moo 5, Bang Niang, Khao Lak; ✆ **0878-936833**), which is open for dinner only (except Mon)—reservations are highly recommended. For Thai food, **Jai Restaurant** (Main Rd.; ✆ **07648-5390**) is excellent and just two doors down from Khao Lak's most happening late-night live music bar, **Happy Snapper** (Main Rd., 5/2 Moo 7, Khao Lak; ✆ **07648-5500;** www.happysnapperbar.com). **O'Connor's Irish Pub** (no phone) is a few steps away, offering Thai cooking classes and serving great Guinness with home-cooked European meals.

YAO ISLANDS

Midway to Krabi and 1 hour's boat ride from Phuket's Bang Rong Pier (north of Boat Lagoon, turn east at the Heroines' Monument), the twin islands of **Ko Yao Yai** and **Ko Yao Noi** ("Big Long Island" and "Little Long Island") are where nature lovers head to enjoy some scenery and relax. A world apart from the clamor of Ko Phi Phi, Phang Nga Bay's two largest islands are not as yet very touristy and are great for cruising by motorbike or mountain bike (available for rent on both islands at around 200B/100B per day).

A couple of reasons these islands never became as popular as Ko Phi Phi is that most beaches are rather stony and the sea is not as clear as around nearby islands, so they are not great for swimming. The nearest things to civilization on Ko Yao Noi are the 7-Eleven store and ATM, and there's still not a traffic light to be seen. Yet this is the more developed of the two islands, with a road running all the way around it and a rapidly growing choice of resorts (mostly on the east coast). Ko Yao Yai, by contrast, has just a few roads and a handful of places to stay.

More active travelers can go kayaking, bird-watching, or head off to snorkel and explore nearby uninhabited islands by longtail; any resort can make arrangements. In addition, there's fishing, jungle walks, or the exhaustive sport of hammock swinging: It all makes for a perfect island escape.

Ferries to both islands leave Bang Rong Pier approximately hourly throughout the day, and cost 120B. Call ahead to your accommodations to arrange transport from the pier.

Where to Stay

Some resorts on Ko Yao Noi open all year, while others close during the rainy season (May–Sept). There's such a range of choice (with several new places set to open in 2010) that you might pay anywhere between 1,000B and 400,000B for a room (yes, that's for *1* night). For a laid-back budget bungalow resort, try **Sabai Corner** (✆ **07659-7497;** www.sabaicornerbungalows.com), which has a handful of bungalows from 1,000B; each has a different design but all have spacious balconies and hammocks. The restaurant here serves up tasty Thai and Italian dishes. A good midrange choice is **Lom'Lae Resort** (✆ **07659-7486;** www.lomlae.com), situated on a tranquil beach at the south end of the island, with rooms from 2,000B (closed May–Sept); it also has a dive shop. Right next door (though vegetation is so dense that guests probably never know) is the tiny, upmarket **Koyao Bay Pavilions** (✆ **07659-7441;** www.koyaobay.com), where the three gorgeous villas go for around 10,000B. You'll find similar prices and facilities at **Ko Yao Island Resort** (✆ **07659-7474;** www.koyao.com), about halfway down the east coast in a former coconut plantation. This place has 15 thatched and well-spaced villas with indoor and outdoor bathrooms.

If you need a break from your chosen resort on Ko Yao Noi, head on down to **Pyramid Bar & Restaurant** (✆ **081415-5274**) at the south end of the east coast, where they serve decent Thai food and good burgers. They also have a pool table and occasional live music.

On **Ko Yao Yai,** the **Yao Yai Island Resort** (✆ **081968-4641;** www.yaoyairesort.com) has bungalows from 1,100B, and the similarly priced **Heimat Gardens Guesthouse** (✆ **085794-7428;** www.heimatgardens.com) is equally close to the beach and offers friendly service.

Six Senses Hideaway Ko Yao ★★★ If there's one person whose job I envy, it's whoever gets to choose the locations for Six Senses resorts. They are always in spectacular places with breathtaking views, and this new Hideaway on Ko Yao is no exception. There's no need for guests to rough it on the regular longtail ferry either; they get whisked to and from the island by swanky speedboat, or helicopter if they prefer. The private pool villas here are set on a hillside that faces a dramatic cluster of limestone peaks rising from the sea. Rooms are equipped with every conceivable luxury, including chilled wine cabinets, and each villa is assigned a personal butler. If money is no object, go for the fabulous hilltop reserve, with its enormous infinity pool and water slide on top of the hill. The simple but stylish teak architecture is a treat for the eyes, and true to its name, Six Senses leaves no sense unfulfilled, with superb cuisine in the Dining Room and Living Room, a host of watersports including sailing classes, and the usual range of heavenly spa treatments.

56 Moo 5, Ko Yao Noi, Phang Nga 82160. ✆ **07641-8500.** Fax 07641-8518. www.sixsenses.com. 56 units. AE, MC, V. 33,000B pool villa; 400,000B hilltop reserve. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; free bicycles; gym; spa; tennis court; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, minibar, private pool, Wi-Fi.

RACHA ISLANDS & PHANG NGA BAY ★★

From Chalong Bay at the south end of Phuket, there's a hulking daily ferry service to the idyllic islet of **Ko Racha** (aka Ko Raya or Ko Raja), a delightful island getaway with a perfect white-sand beach. It's hugely popular with day-trippers in the dry season.

Sybarites in search of seclusion can also splash out at their own pool villa at **The Racha** (✆ **07635-5455;** www.theracha.com), a magnificent contemporary-styled luxury hotel that cascades down the hill to the cerulean sea. (The hotel offers speedboat transfers to its guests, subject to the weather.) You'll need deep pockets for their premium Lighthouse suite, which costs 65,000B, but if that seems a bit steep, you can get deluxe villa rates online for 9,200B.

Phang Nga Bay, with its towering karst limestone spires, is a very popular day trip by boat—some might say *too* popular, with hordes of tour groups descending on its tiny beaches. A more peaceful trip around the bay by sea kayak is possibly a better bet (see "Sea Kayaking," p. 252). **Ko Phi Phi** is another oversold day trip for snorkeling, or more commonly an overnight stay from Phuket. See p. 268 for information.

6 KRABI ★★ (AO NANG, RAILAY & KHLONG MUANG BEACHES)

814km (506 miles) S of Bangkok; 165km (103 miles) E of Phuket; 42km (26 miles) E of Ko Phi Phi; 276km (171 miles) N of Satun; 211km (131 miles) SW of Surat Thani

For many tourists, Krabi has become a popular, more eco-friendly alternative to the heavily commercialized Phuket and resort boomtown of Ko Phi Phi. For others, it's an easy stop along the way. Flights connecting with Krabi's international airport mean tourists, in fact, can bypass Bangkok and arrive directly from other parts of Asia, or arrange an air or road transfer from Phuket International airport. Destination Air, an amphibious light plane service based in Phuket, also services this popular resort region. Ferries and minivans from other destinations connect via *songtaew* and boats to the nearby tourist strip of Ao Nang and farther-flung beaches. Railay, with its famed soft sands, and limestone cliffs with ample abseiling opportunities, is accessed by boat (from either Krabi Town to the northeast, or more commonly from Ao Nang Beach to the west). Khlong Muang Beach, more recently developed, lies just north of Ao Nang by road.

The best time to visit the Krabi area is November through April, with January and February the ideal months. The rainy season runs May through October when the crowds disperse and the wet weather and choppy seas drive away all but the hardiest.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

There are daily bus and minibus connections between Krabi-Phuket and Krabi-Surat Thani, for the east coast islands (Samui, Ko Pha Ngan). A ferry also leaves daily connecting Phuket (departing at 8:30am; high season only). Tickets are available from Phuket Pier in Phuket Town (✆ **07623-2040**); the trip takes 2 hours and costs 350B.

BY PLANE **Tiger Airways** (✆ **02649-9688** in Bangkok; www.tigerairways.com) has direct flights from Singapore. **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111**; www.thaiair.com), Bangkok Airways (✆ 02270-6699; www.bangkokair.com), and **Thai AirAsia** (✆ **02515-9999;** www.airasia.com) fly from Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

From Krabi airport, you can catch a minivan to town for 90B, or more for farther beaches. Taxis start at 350B.

BY BOAT Twice-daily trips leave from Ko Phi Phi to Krabi (9am and 2pm; trip time: 2 hr.; cost 350B). There are two daily boats from Ko Lanta to Krabi in the high season (8am and 1pm; trip time: 2½ hr.; cost 350B).

BY BUS Two air-conditioned VIP 24-seater buses leave daily from **Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111;** trip time: 12 hr.; fare 800B) to Krabi Town. Frequently scheduled air-conditioned minibuses leave daily from Surat Thani to Krabi (trip time: 2¾ hr.; 250B). Three air-conditioned minibuses leave daily from Phuket Town to Krabi (trip time: 3½ hr.; fare 300B).

Visitor information

Most services in Krabi town are on Utarakit Road, paralleling the waterfront (to the right as you alight the ferry). Here you'll find the **TAT Office** (✆ **07562-2163**) and a number of **banks** with ATM service. The **post office** and **police station** (✆ **07563-7208**) are located south on Utarakit Road, to the left as you leave the pier. There are also banks in Ao Nang, near the Phra Nang Inn, but nothing at Railay.

Check the small shops around town for a copy of the local free map of the resort area, town, and surrounding islands.

Getting Around

Krabi Town is the commercial hub in the area, but few bother to stay. There is frequent *songtaew* (pickup truck) service between Krabi Town and Ao Nang Beach; just flag down a white pickup (the trip takes 30 min. and costs 30B).

Railay Beach and the resorts on the surrounding beaches are cut off by a ridge of cliffs from the mainland and, therefore, are accessed by boat. From the pier in Krabi Town, you'll pay anything from 100B; trip time 45 min.). From the beach at Ao Nang (at the small pavilion across from the Phra Nang Inn), the trip takes just 20 minutes and costs 80B.

Khlong Muang beach is some 25km (16 miles) northwest of Krabi Town. Expect to pay at least 300B for a taxi.

The limestone formations around the coastline here not only are gorgeous visually, but also are great spots to explore by small boat. Some, such as the famous **Ko Hong** ★, are almost entirely enclosed—with brilliant blue lagoons at their heart. Boats slip inside them at low tide via almost invisible, narrow chasms; ask at your resort for information about boat tours.

If you're checking in at any resort, ask about transportation arrangements (which are often included) and prevailing weather conditions.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Krabi has a number of sites, but most visitors head straight for the beaches to relax. Popular activities are day boat trips, snorkeling, and rock climbing at Railay East.

Just north and east of Krabi Town, though, you will find **Wat Tham Sua (The Tiger Temple),** a stunning hilltop pilgrimage point. A punishing 30- to 40-minute climb brings you to the rocky pinnacle where a Buddhist statuary overlooks the surrounding area stretching from Krabi Town to the cliffs near Railay. There is a large monastery and temple compound built into the rock at the bottom of the mountain, where you may chance upon a monk in silent meditation or chat with one of the friendly temple stewards (most are eager to practice English). The abbot speaks English and welcomes foreign students of meditation. If you decide to climb the steep temple mountain, go in either

the early morning or the late afternoon to beat the heat. The view from above is worth it. ***Note:*** Be careful of the many monkeys here. Ignore them at all cost, and don't hold anything tempting in your hands or it will be taken.

The beaches and stunning cliffs of **Railay Beach** are certainly worth a day trip, even if you don't stay there (see "Where to Stay," below). Divided into Railay East and West, the former offers the best rock-climbing cliffs, situated next to mud flats. The West has the sort of soft powdery sands that attract beach bunnies, though longtails dock right here and the resulting noise of the motors can ruin the peacefulness of the gorgeous cerulean sea. At **Ao Nang,** longtail boat drivers try to drum up groups of passengers at a small pavilion just across from the Phra Nang Inn for the 80B ride (20 min.). From the docks in Krabi Town, it costs 100B and takes 40 minutes. (The trip is offered dawn till dusk only.)

The craggy limestone cliffs of Railay make it one of the best-known **rock-climbing** spots in the region. It is certainly not for the fainthearted; nevertheless, the whole cliff area is well organized (with mapped routes) and safety bolts drilled into the rock. There are a number of companies offering full and half-day courses, as well as rental equipment for experienced climbers. There are also many routes suitable for beginners. Climbing schools set up "top rope" climbing for safety, whereby climbers are attached by a rope through a fixed pulley at the top, and to a guide on the other end, holding you fast. The schools all offer similar rates and have offices scattered around Railay Beach, with posters and pamphlets everywhere. Try **King Climbers** (✆ **07563-7125;** www.railay.com) or **Hot Rock** (✆ **07562-1771;** www.railayadventure.com). Half-day courses start at about 1,000B, full-day courses are from 1,800B, and 3-day courses run from 6,000B.

Near Railay Beach is **Phra Nang Beach,** a secluded section of sand that is either a short 50B boat trip from Railay proper, or a cliffside walk east, past Rayavadee Resort and south along a shaded cliffside path (watch out for monkeys). From here, you can swim or kayak around the craggy hunk of rock just a few meters away offshore, or explore the **Tham Phra Nang,** or Princess Cave, a small cavern at the base of a tall cliff, filled with huge phallic sculptures where, legend has it, donors attain fertility. The cliffs are stunning and the sunsets spectacular.

Along the path to **Phra Nang Beach,** you'll find signs pointing up to a small cleft in the rocks. After a short hike up a steep escarpment and then an often treacherously muddy downward climb (use the ropes to avoid slipping), you'll arrive at a shallow salt-water lagoon. How it got up here is anyone's guess.

Full-day boat trips and **snorkeling** to **Ko Poda** ★ can be arranged from any beachfront tour agent or hotel near Krabi, which will take you to a few small coral sites as well as any number of secluded coves and islets (or *hongs*), starting at 1,000B for a half-day or 1,800B for a full day. During the monsoon season, boats leave from Nam Mao Beach (near Krabi Town) only and are subject to cancellation in rough weather. Or you can rent snorkel gear from any of the tour operators along Ao Nang or Railay for about 100B per day.

Day **kayak tours** to outlying islands, or the mangroves near **Ao Luk,** are becoming popular for visitors to Ao Nang. Contact **Sea, Land and Trek Co.** (79/9 Moo 5, Ao Nang; ✆ **07563-7364;** www.sealandandtrek.com) or **Sea Kayak Krabi** (40 Ruenrudee Rd., Krabi; ✆ **07563-0270;** www.seakayak-krabi.com) to set up a trip. Rates for a day out begin at 1,500B.

There are some dive operators in Krabi, but you'll have to travel farther to reach the better sites. Most people prefer to book from Ko Phi Phi (p. 270) or Phuket (p. 253).

WHERE TO STAY

Krabi Town

Few travelers stay in Krabi Town, but if you're stuck or are too tired to leave, the best hotel in town is **Maritime Park & Spa** (1 Tungfah Rd.; ✆ **07562-0028;** www.maritimeparkandspa.com), with superior rooms starting at 3,200B.

Railay Beach

Very Expensive

Rayavadee ★★★ Rayavadee offers unique two-story rondavels (circular pavilions), most of which are large and luxurious. These come with every modern convenience and some, set in enclosed gardens, can be very private. Ground-floor sitting rooms have a central, double-size hanging lounger with cushions. Upper-story bedrooms are all silk and teak, and private bathrooms have big Jacuzzi tubs and luxury products. Some gardens feature hammocks or (unheated) whirlpools. The resort grounds lie at the base of towering cliffs on the island's most choice piece of property, a triangle of land where each point accesses the island's beaches: Phra Nang, Nam Mao, and Railay. Their main dining outlet is of high quality, while their seaside Thai restaurant, Raitalay, provides a more romantic and relaxed atmosphere outdoors. The resort feels very much like a peaceful village, with paths meandering among private lotus ponds and meticulous landscaping. The price is high, but the location, luxury, and exclusivity warrant it.

214 Moo 2, Tambol Ao Nang, Amphur Muang, Krabi 81000 (30 min. west of Krabi Town by longtail boat, or 70 min. from Phuket on the resort's own launch). ✆ **07562-0740.** Fax 07562-0050. www.rayavadee.com. 102 units. 22,300B–35,000B deluxe pavilion; from 28,300B hydro-pool pavilion; from 35,000B family pavilion; from 72,000B specialty villas. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; fitness center; outdoor pool w/children's pool; room service; spa; air-conditioned squash court; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Moderate

Railay Bay Resort Value Stretching right through from West Railay to East Railay, this resort offers seven different types of lodgings, scattered around a shady coconut grove. A recent renovation has left all rooms, even the well-priced deluxe rooms, looking sparkling, and the spa, beachside patio, and pool are great places to laze the days away. The new beachfront suites are very spacious and include every facility, as well as superb views from the private terrace. The restaurant, which serves up tasty seafood and pizzas, is yet another reason to rest up here.

145 Moo 2, Railay Beach, Ao Nang, Krabi 81000 (on Railay Beach, longtails from Ao Nang pull up onshore). ✆ **07562-2998.** www.railaybayresort.com. 130 units. From 3,700B deluxe; from 5,850B cottage; from 10,800B villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet; pool; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Inexpensive

Diamond Cave Bungalows & Resort Located on the eastern side of the peninsula, Diamond Cave is a clean, cozy bungalow resort set in shady gardens—it's a nice place to escape the vagaries of life and enjoy some nearby climbing. Since Diamond Cave is at the far end of Railay Beach East, it's far from the good sandy beaches, but close to lots of budget dining and bars.

36 Moo 1, Ao Nang Krabi 81000 (north end of Railay East Beach). ✆ **07562-2589.** Fax 07562-2590. www.diamondcave-railay.com. 32 units. From 1,650B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar, high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, no phone.

Ao Nang Beach

Moderate

Golden Beach Resort Comparable in service to the nearby Phra Nang Inn (see below), the Golden Beach's deluxe rooms are a slightly higher standard. The free-standing, pagoda suites make masterful use of curved lines inside and out, and feature luxurious canopy beds and indoor/outdoor bathrooms. Standard rooms are cozy. The pool is large and inviting, and the resort is just a short hop down a cul-de-sac and away from busy, central Ao Nang.

254 Moo 2, Ao Nan, Krabi 81000 (the eastern end of Ao Nang, behind the boat pavilion for trips to Railay). ✆ **07563-7870.** Fax 07563-7875. www.goldenbeach-resort.com. 70 units. From 3,840B double; from 5,100B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet; large outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Krabi Resort The popular Krabi Resort is the only property in Ao Nang with direct beach access. It is a compound of two hotel blocks and an array of free-standing beachside bungalows. Tidy grounds surround a fine swimming pool, but other resort amenities are unused and aging. More private seaview bungalows are the best choice: They're large and clean, with parquet floors, high ceilings, rattan furnishings, and lots of little Thai touches. The resort is just north of the main shopping and restaurant area at Ao Nang, but a lovely beach walk. Ask about their overnight trips to rustic bungalows on nearby Poda Island.

232 Moo 2, Ao Nang Beach, Krabi 81000 (overlooking beach at Ao Nang). ✆ **07563-7030.** www.krabiresort.net. 170 units. 3,200B–6,400B bungalow priced according to view; from 8,900B suite; 20,000B family suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; bikes; fitness center; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; outdoor lighted tennis courts; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Phra Nang Inn The Phra Nang Inn, famed for its eccentric decor, has undergone a complete renovation and toning down of its wild side, though you'll still probably find funky local artwork somewhere in your room. Rooms are bright and breezy, beds are big and comfy, and the wood-paneled floors are a pleasure to walk on. The hotel's two wings are on either side of the busiest intersection in Ao Nang, and the helpful staff can help arrange tours and onward boat travel (from right across the street).

119 Ao Nang Beach (P.O. Box 25), Krabi 81000 (overlooking beach at Ao Nang-Railay boat dock). ✆ **07563-7130.** Fax 07563-7134. www.phrananginn.com. 88 units. 4,000B–6,200B double; from 6,800B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; small pool; room service; sauna; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Ao Nang has lots of budget guesthouses to choose from. The friendly folks at **J Mansion** (302 Moo 2, Ao Nang; ✆ **07569-5128;** www.jmansionaonang.com) have clean, simple rooms with a fan or air-conditioning starting at 800B, just 100m (328 ft.) from the beach. If you're looking for a few more comforts, try **Ao Nang Village Resort** (49/3 Moo 2, Ao Nang Village; ✆ **07563-7544**), with gardenview rooms from 1,800B.

Khlong Muang Beach

Following the coast north of the busy Ao Nang strip, you'll come to quiet Khlong Muang with a long stretch of quiet beach and a few excellent resorts from which to choose.

Expensive

Nakamanda ★★★ A collection of luxurious private villas sprinkled among indigo pools and pavilions, surrounded by high stone walls, this slickly designed resort sits on the far northern end of Krabi (just past the Sheraton; see below). The name means the

"sacred sea dragon," and this stylish outcrop does look otherworldly. Public spaces are delightfully spartan; the eclectic decor tends to mix Angkorian antiquities with a cool contemporary style; and everything is set amid meticulously kept gardens. Villas are aligned for optimal privacy, and inside everything is sumptuous bleached wood and granite. Rooms range from a basic villa to over-the-top private-pool villas with huge terraces and sea views. The spa is inviting; the seaside pool, an oasis; and the resort restaurant, excellent.

126 Moo 3, Khlong Muang Beach, Tambon Nongtalay, Krabi 81000. ✆ **07562-8200.** Fax 07564-4390. www.nakamanda.com. 39 units. From 8,500B sala villa; 12,000B Jacuzzi villa; 24,000B pool villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; health club; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort ★★★ A large circular drive and luxurious modern lobby pavilion usher you into this expansive resort. Rooms are set in large blocks, a U-shaped configuration connected by boardwalks above mangrove flats that flood with the daily tide. Moderate-sized rooms come with fine tile and dark wood furnishings, a fusion of simple lines, and more flamboyant Art Deco decor. Services range from fine-dining choices in the main building to more laid-back fare taken by the large, luxurious beachside pool. Also on hand are plenty of fitness facilities, which offer a great variety of programs (from kickboxing to meditation), after which a treatment at the spa will dispel all aches or stress.

155 Moo 2, Khlong Muang Beach, Nong Talay, Krabi 81000 (15km/9⅓ miles north of Ao Nang; 26km/16 miles from Krabi Town). ✆ **07562-8000.** Fax 07562-8028. www.sheraton.com. 246 units. From 6,500B double; 16,500B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; babysitting; bikes; kids' club; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; tennis court; Wi-Fi; watersports equipment . *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Sofitel Phokeethra Krabi ★★★ Kids The latest luxury resort to grace this pretty coastline has the full complement of extensively manicured lawns, and a gigantic sculpted pool, surrounded by coconut groves. Boasting an opulent mix of Thai and colonial architecture, this awesome property features a palatial lobby and magnificent views. The vast rooms are classically furnished, with polished teak floors, broad balconies, and a warm butterscotch-and-cream decor. Because it caters not just to upscale tourists but also to large conference groups and wedding parties, expect high standards of service and dining—including a Lancôme spa, a wide range of business facilities, and a children's playground for the hotel's junior guests.

Khlong Muang Beach, Tambon Nongtalay, Krabi 81000. ✆ **07562-7800.** Fax 07562-7899. www.sofitel.com. 276 units. From $125 superior oceanview; from $200 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 5 bars; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports rentals; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

The Tubkaak ★★★ Finds On Tubkaak Beach, just 4km (2½ miles) beyond Khlong Muang Beach, this boutique resort enjoys superb views across a surreal horizon of limestone outcrops rising from the sea. The solid, wooden buildings are very pleasing to the eye, and, with only 42 rooms, the place is small enough for staff to provide the kind of personal attention that makes every guest feel special. Interiors are very tastefully designed, with lavish use of trademark Thai materials such as teak and silk. Such facilities as a huge free-form swimming pool, an elegant spa, and a fitness center guarantee that guests don't get bored, and the resort has already won several awards for its outstanding quality.

 123 Moo 3, Tubkaak Beach, Tambon Nongtalay, Amphur Muang, Krabi 81000. ✆ **07562-8400.** Fax 07562-8499. www.tubkaak.com. 42 units. 14,000B–19,000B double; from 30,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness center; outdoor pool; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

In addition to the hotels reviewed above, also try the family-run, eco-friendly **Krabi Sands Resort** (118 Moo 3, Khlong Muang; ✆ **07560-0027;** www.krabisands.com), with bungalows from 4,000B.

WHERE TO DINE

Apart from the good dining choices at the many resorts listed above, here are a few more recommendations around the region: In the north end of Krabi Town, the **Night Market** (no phone), just off Utarakit riverside road, on Maharaj Soi 10, has good local specials such as deep-fried oysters and noodles. For good Western food, try **Café Europa** (✆ **07562-0407**), at 1/9 Soi Ruamjit, Maharat Rd., a popular spot with local expats. In Ao Nang, the beachside tourist street is already turning into a mini-Patong, with heaps of neon-lit shops and storefront eateries: Try **Ao Nang Cuisine** (✆ **07569-5260**) for good Thai fare, **Navrang Mahal** (no phone) for Indian, or **Irish Rover** (✆ **7563-7607**) for continental cuisine. On Railay, all the beachside bars and bungalows serve good Thai and continental nosh.

7 KO PHI PHI ★

814km (506 miles) S of Bangkok, then 42km (26 miles) W of Krabi; 160km (99 miles) SW of Phuket

Phi Phi is in fact two islands: **Phi Phi Leh** and **Phi Phi Don.** The latter is the main barbell-shaped island whose central isthmus (the barbell handle) was hit badly by the tsunami. Ko Phi Phi is a popular choice for day trips, snorkeling, and scuba junkets from Krabi. Crowds of noisy tourists also descend upon **Maya Bay,** on Phi Phi Ley, where filmmakers shot the Hollywood film *The Beach,* with Leonardo DiCaprio. Thai students and environmentalists have long protested the amounts of rubbish left by these tour groups. (***Note:*** Day-trippers should dispose of trash after arriving back onto the mainland, not while they are here.)

All visitors arrive at the busy ferry port in south-facing **Tonsai Bay.** The beach is quite attractive but the constant coming and going of boats makes it unadvisable for swimming. Most people just walk the 300m (984 ft.) across the barbell handle to north-facing **Loh Dalam Bay,** a spectacular, horseshoe-shaped crescent of blinding-white sand. Small beachfront outfits rent snorkel gear and conduct longtail boat tours to quiet coves with great views of coral reefs and sea life for as little as 1,000B for an all-day trip (packing your own lunch). You can rent kayaks and do a little exploring on your own, or hike to one of the island viewpoints and soak up the memorable view of back-to-back bays and rugged limestone cliffs.

Phi Phi Ley is famed for its coveted **swallow nests** and the courageous pole-climbing daredevils who collect them (the saliva-coated nests fetch a hefty price as the main ingredient in a much-favored Chinese soup). This smaller island is protected as a park, but can be visited as part of most day trips.

Before the 2004 tsunami, many of the settlements and hotels on Ko Phi Phi had been built illegally by squatters on land belonging to the once-pristine National Marine Park.

These facilities were—almost literally—wiped off the map by the tragic disaster. With the help of many international volunteers who cleared the land of refuse, the crowds have returned to the island, but unfortunately so has the unplanned chaos of pre-tsunami days. Beaches are once again crammed with hotels, low-end guesthouses, and backpackers.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, the government had hinted at earmarking Phi Phi Don as a luxury destination (indeed Phi Phi already supported a number of high-end resorts on more remote beaches), but amid the unregulated rush to make as much money as possible from this once-sublime location, the plan failed. In terms of wholesale environmental degradation, we are, sadly, right back to square one.

GETTING THERE

The easiest but costliest method to get here is to take a flight from Phuket on **Destination Air** (✆ **07632-8637;** fax 07632-8598; www.destinationair.com), whose fleet of amphibious Cessnas fly regularly in high season to resort islands such as Phi Phi. The journey takes just 16 minutes. Boats from the pier in central Krabi Town run at least twice daily (10am and 3pm; more in high season) and cost from 350B.

From Phuket, there are a number of ferry services leaving from the Ratchada (Rasada) Pier near Phuket Town, at 8:30am and 1:30pm, with rates around 450B for the 2-hour trip. Be sure to check out where the life jackets are stashed, as several Phi Phi ferries sank in the last few years, fortunately with no serious injuries.

WHERE TO STAY

Because Ko Phi Phi is very crowded these days, it's difficult to find good, budget accommodations at a reasonable price. It's best to book in advance. Most cheaper bungalows are along the beach and hills to the right of the ferry pier in the little backpacker neighborhood. In addition to the hotels below, which are all on remote beaches, good options on the main beaches include **Phi Phi Hotel** and **Phi Phi Banyan Villa** (near the ferry dock; ✆ **07561-1233**), on Tonsai Beach, with rooms from 1,700B. On Loh Dalam Bay, the luxury resort **Phi Phi Island Cabana** (✆ **02275-5965** in Bangkok; www.phiphicabana.com) has rooms that start from 7,000B for a double.

Expensive

Holiday Inn Phi Phi The Holiday Inn has a lot of things going for it—a great location on beautiful Laem Tong beach, lovely manicured lawns, hammocks gently swaying under beachfront palm trees. The bungalows are comfortable enough, with spacious balconies, though the rooms lack local touches to give them character. There are plenty of activities to keep guests busy, such as a dive center, game fishing, and cookery classes, and the restaurants offer decent fare.

Laem Thong Beach, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi. Phuket Office: 100/435 Moo 5, Chalermprakiet Rama 9 Rd., T. Rassada, Phuket 83000. ✆ **07562-7300.** www.phiphi.holidayinn.com. 77 units. 6,700B–8,300B. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; health club; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports rentals; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD/CD player, fridge, minibar.

Phi Phi Island Village ★★★ Accessible only by a 30-minute boat ride (regular shuttles are available from the ferry pier), this is a top choice among the islands' more far-flung resorts. Deluxe bungalows offer private balconies and unusual open-plan bathrooms (shower only); with such unrivaled ocean views, it's not surprising this place proves a popular choice for families, couples, and honeymooners. A luxury spa, two large pools, fine-dining options, and an in-house tour program service and scuba school

complete the picture. There's obviously a need to be self-contained with this location; apart from a few nearby jungle walks, it's all about relaxing. The beachfront at high tide is lovely and sunset is inspiring.

Phuket Office: 89 Satoon Rd., Phuket 83000. (Hotel located on Loh Ba Kao Bay, at the northeast end of the island, 30 min. by longtail boat). ✆ **07621-5014.** Fax 07621-4918. www.ppisland.com. 100 units. 6,700B–9,200B double; from 19,000B villa. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; babysitting; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, no phone.

Zeavola ★★ Many Thais long for a return to their rural village roots, a time when life was simple. That is what Zeavola, tucked away in the northeast corner of the island, is trying to create—a return to traditional Thai living. Sand walkways cut through palm trees, leading to free-standing thatch-roofed teak suites. Each is luxuriously appointed with polished teakwood floors, oversize daybeds, and both indoor and outdoor rain showers. The living areas extend past glass doors to covered teakwood patios, where privacy is supplied by electronically controlled bamboo blinds. What makes the suites truly unique, however, are the rustic flourishes: old-fashioned copper piping, wooden taps, pottery sink basins, and *mon khwan* cushions (the traditional triangular Thai pillows) for the patios. This rustic theme extends to the fine hillside spa but not, for obvious reasons, to the resort's first-class PADI dive center and private dive boat. ***Hint:*** The beachfront suite trades privacy for the sea view; some garden suites have partial ocean views without the loss of privacy.

11 Moo 8, Laem Tong Beach, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi 81000. ✆ **07562-7000.** Fax 07562-7023. www.zeavola.com. 52 units. 6,800B village suite; 7,800B garden suite; 12,800B beachfront suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants (Thai, Italian); airport transfers; saltwater pool; spa; watersports equipment; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, CD player, hair dryer, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE & DRINK

Phi Phi Don is packed with eateries. In downtown central Tonsai, look out for **Mama's Restaurant, Pee Pee Bakery, Le Grand Bleu, McPluto Burger, Ton Sai Seafood, Little Britain Café, Hibachi, Cosmic Pizza**—and **Papaya** for Thai food. You'll also find a few little halal food stands and vendors with wheeled carts making Southern-style sweet *roti* (pancake) with banana. Over on Loh Dalum, check out **Ciao Bella** for tasty Italian fare.

Once a Muslim village, Phi Phi now parties into the night at such places as the **Reggae Bar** (with a Thai boxing ring), **Hippies Bar** (with a nightly fire show), **Apache,** and **Carlito's;** there's even an Irish pub and a sports bar. Don't miss the laid-back, beachfront **Sunflower Bar** on Loh Dalam Bay.

KO PHI PHI ACTIVITIES

Kayaks can be rented on the beach for leisurely paddling for around 200B per hour. **Snorkeling** trips around the island are popular and you can sign up for a group tour with any hotel or with any of the many beachfront travel agencies for as little as 600B per day. To hire a longtail boat for a half-day private trip, expect to pay around 1,200B.

Scuba diving is quite popular here, too, and **Phi Phi Scuba** (✆ **07561-2665;** www.ppscuba.com), among other full-service, professional outfits, offers anything from day trips to multiday adventures, as well as all the requisite PADI course instruction. Alternatively, try **Visa Diving** (✆ **07560-1157;** www.visadiving.com) on the main strip just east of the ferry pier. Check the websites for prices.

Cat's Climbing Shop, at Tonsai Bay (✆ **08178-75101,** mobile), runs rock-climbing trips around the gnarled cliffs of the two Phi Phi islands; prices run around 1,000B for a half day, 1,500B for a full day.

If you feel like a real adrenaline rush, you can sign up with a tour operator to go **cliff jumping** (jumping off a cliff into the sea), Phi Phi's latest craze, but be prepared to end up with a dislocated shoulder, broken back, or worse, and don't expect the operator's insurance to cover the damages.

8 KO LANTA ★

70km (43 miles) SE of Krabi

The two islands of Ko Lanta Yai (Big Lanta Island) and Ko Lanta Noi (Small Lanta Island) are a few hours' road and boat trip from Krabi airport. In a few years, Ko Lanta Yai has already become a bohemian alternative to heady Samui, or pricey Phuket. However, the island is big enough that, during the high season (Nov–Mar), small pockets of seclusion can be found—especially in the far south and over on the east coast, where Muslim fishing villagers carry on with their traditional economy, ignoring the rolling cement trucks and bangs of construction on the upper west coast, where most resorts are located. Despite the island's growing popularity, the endless white-sand beaches are far from crowded. A great mix of international visitors ensures excellent nightlife, with a good array of funky bars and small dance clubs. During March, when the crowds have left, regional locals head to historic Lanta Old Town for the annual Laanta Lanta Festival—a celebration of street art, performance, cultural shows, music, dance, fun, and games.

GETTING THERE

Minivans from Krabi Town, Trang, and Phuket make connections to Ko Lanta Yai via two vehicular ferries: one from the mainland to Ko Lanta Noi and across the island by car before another ferry to Ko Lanta Yai. Most transport stops in the small town of Saladan near the ferry pier on the northern tip of Lanta Yai. From Saladan, catch a pickup truck ride to the resort of your choice. Contact **Kanokwan Tour** (Lanta office: ✆ **07568-4419**) or **Lanta Transport Co.** (✆ **07566-8120**), if you need to make transportation arrangements.

Destination Air's (✆ **07632-8637-9;** www.destinationair.com) amphibious Cessnas can fly you from Phuket to your destination on Ko Lanta in a matter of minutes; check availability and pricing well in advance.

WHERE TO STAY

Very Expensive

Layana ★★ A small boutique resort located near the northern end of the west coast, Layana has an excellent spa and offers stylish, contemporary accommodations close to the ocean and a grand pool uniquely calibrated to the same salinity as human tears. Each room has an open, airy feel with a lush decor of hard woods, silks, and local art. It carries a high price tag, but the resort's facilities and excellent service make it worth considering.

272 Moo 3, Saladan, Phra-Ae Beach, Ko Lanta Yai, Krabi 81150. ✆ **07560-7100.** Fax 07560-7199. www.layanaresort.com. 50 units. From 10,800B double; from 16,100B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; bikes; health club; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Pimalai Resort and Spa ★★★ Located in the far southwest of the island, close to the National Park headquarters, Pimalai was the first luxury resort on the island. Designed by a young, eco-sensitive Thai architect, it continues to win awards in hospitality excellence and environmental awareness. A fine marriage of comfort and proximity to nature, these stylish villas sprawl down rolling hills and lush gardens right onto the pristine beach; some have pools and small luxuries such as CD and DVD players. Shady walkways have been built around the trees and the infinity pool is beautiful; there's excellent dining in a large open-air *sala,* or down on the beach in a funky thatched bar and eatery hewn from logs. The design throughout—from the simple thatched treatment *salas* and trickling waterfall in the spa, to the many small touches of Thai arts—reminds you that you are indeed in Thailand.

99 Moo 5, Ba Kan Tiang Beach, Ko Lanta Yai, Krabi 81150 (on the far SW coast of Lanta Yai). ✆ **07560-7999.** Fax 07560-7998. www.pimalai.com. 118 units. From 14,000B double; from 27,000B suite; from 29,000B beach villa; from 36,000B pool villa. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 3 bars; airport transfers; bikes; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; spa; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Expensive

Costa Lanta ★★ Lauded for its unique architectural design, the Costa Lanta boasts sleek rooms, which beautifully balance Western minimalism and Thai rustic decor, oceanside decks, and long pools. The resort has also garnered positive reviews for its innovative back-to-nature approach, and for its reputation for offering some of the island's best cuisine and cocktails. In the interest of environmental preservation, the resort is built back from the beach under the natural tree line and caters to Thai yuppies as much as to foreign tourists.

212 Moo 1, Saladan, Ko Lanta Yai, Krabi 81150. ✆ **02662-3550.** Fax 02260-9067. www.costalanta.com. 6,200B–9,700B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; watersports rentals. *In room:* A/C, CD player, fridge, minibar.

Moderate/Inexpensive

Mango House ★ This unique guesthouse is on the east coast, in an area that was once a hub of Chinese mercantile trade. The studio rooms and two-bedroom villas here are historic Thai fishermen's homes built on stilts over the sea, adjacent to a sea gypsy village. The solid post and beam structures feature modern touches of Chinese decor, with spectacular views from private seafront patios. Downstairs, there's the first-rate **Mango Bistro** for eats. This is Old Town living at its finest.

Mango House, Ban Saladan, Lanta Old Town, Ko Lanta Yai, Krabi 81150. ✆ **07569-7181** or 08694-86836 (mobile). 500B–2,500B double (varies with location and size). MC, V. Amenities: Bistro; bar; Wi-Fi. In room: Fridge, minibar.

Moonlight Bay Resort ★★ Long popular in the far south of Lanta, Moonlight Bay is situated by a small river facing the sea. After a renovation, the cottages are more contemporary chic than rustic, but the vibe is laid-back and, for many, the isolation blissful. Don't miss the excellent treatments at the Na Lanta spa.

69 Moo 8, Khlongtob, Ko Lanta Yai, Krabi 81150. ✆ **07566-2590.** Fax 07566-2594. www.moonlightresort.com. 30 units. 2,000B–6,900B double (varies with location and size). AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet; small Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE & DRINK

Cool places to chill on Ko Lanta include **Red Snapper** (176 Moo 2, Phra Ae Beach; ✆ **07885-6965;** www.redsnapper-lanta.com), which specializes in fusion food; **Mango**

Bistro (see above) at Lanta Old Town; **Time for Lime Cooking School,** at Khlong Dao Beach (✆ **07568-4590;** www.timeforlime.net); and, with funky tunes by international DJs, the groovy **Club IBARK,** at Khlong Nin Beach (www.ibarkkrabi.com).

9 TRANG ★

129km (80 miles) SE of Krabi

Trang Province, south of Krabi, is where it's at if you're looking for a real Thai-style beach holiday in the south. Popular with Thai tourists, the large province is spectacularly placed, with plenty of unspoiled national parks and 46 islands. The jumping-off point for the islands is at **Pak Meng Beach,** about 40km (25 miles) west of the small town of Trang. Day tours for snorkelers are affordable and the scenery is much like nearby Krabi, but cheaper and without as many tourists. Bear in mind that during the monsoon season (May–Oct), there are no day tours and many resorts close down.

Trang Province is also great for light adventure activities such as sea kayaking and diving. **Had Chao Mai National Park,** which consists of several islands—**Ko Kradan,** one of the Andaman's real gems, with healthy coral reefs, azure seas, and powder-soft sands; **Ko Mook** (Muk), famous for the Emerald Cave, a hidden lagoon, which is accessible only at low tide; **Ko Waen** and **Ko Chueak,** which offer excellent deep-sea diving and also a chance to spot the rare dugong (a dolphinlike creature). For mainland nature visits, visit wildlife sanctuaries such as **Namtok Khao Chong** and **Khlong Lamchan Park,** which boast waterfalls, trails, and caves. The **Southern Thailand Botanical Garden** (Thung Khai), on the Trang-Palian Road (Hwy. 404), offers stunning nature trails through lowland jungle and tropical gardens. For keen adventurers, there are some pretty remote islands—one such island is **Tarutao Marine National Park,** which lies close to the Malaysian border, in Satun province. This region is great for kayaking and pristine diving. For more adventure tour info, see **www.paddleasia.com**.

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE One daily flight from Bangkok is serviced by **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com).

BY TRAIN Trang city is connected by train with Bangkok on the main north-south line. Two daily departures make the 16-hour trek. Ask for details at **Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **1690**).

BY BUS There are frequent buses from Bangkok's **Southern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02793-8111**) and minibus connections from Krabi and Surat Thani. When you arrive in Trang, connect by minibus with Pak Meng Beach for around 50B per person, or 500B to hire the entire vehicle; it's about a 1-hour ride.

Ferryboats to the outlying islands leave regularly all day from the pier on the north end of the beach. It costs around 800B to 1,000B for an all-day tour by boat (including lunch), and they can drop you off at any number of islands (Ko Ngai, Ko Mook, or Ko Kradan); though, if you are staying at one of the island resorts, your hosts will usually arrange transfers for you. Try **Chao Mai Tour** (✆ **07521-4742**), just one among many tour operators at the port, or contact any of the hotels below and they can help with arrangements.

Near the Anantara is **Pakmeng Resort** (60/1 Moo 4, Tambol Maifad, Trang; ✆ **07527-4112;** www.pakmengresort.com), rustic but cozy and quiet in a mangrove plantation near the sea wall. Rooms range from 900B to 1,200B. **Southern Thailand Botanical Gardens** (✆ **07521-8435**) also has basic accommodations available for around 200B.

Anantara Si Kao Resort ★ Trang's foremost luxury beach resort enjoys an ideal location in a quiet spot on the west-facing coast, with dramatic views of sunsets behind karst outcrops in the Andaman Sea. With fine dining, a great spa facility and wellness center, plus neat contemporary Thai room design, this is the kind of place that is now attracting escapees from busy Phuket and Phi Phi. They also operate a private beach resort on nearby Ko Kradan, where guests can nibble on a steak sandwich and sip a glass of chilled wine while wiggling their toes in the dazzling-white sand.

Changlang Beach, Trang 92150. ✆ **07520-5888.** Fax 07520-5899. www.sikao.anantara.com. 138 units. From 7,500B double; from 15,500 pool suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; bikes; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Where to Stay on the Islands

If you prebook a stay on the nearby islands, the resorts will help with transfers; otherwise, head for the ferries that leave frequently from Pak Meng Pier. **Ko Ngai** (aka Ko Hai) is the most developed island, with half a dozen smart places, including the quaint **CoCo Cottages** (✆ **07522-4387;** www.coco-cottage.com), an environmentally friendly cluster run by a cheerful Thai family; beach cottages range from 1,750B to 4,900B. Another good bet is right next door, where the **Thapwarin Resort** (✆ **081894-3585,** mobile; www.thapwarin.com) has big, comfy bamboo and rattan cottages for similar rates. On **Ko Mook,** go for **Sivalai Resort** (✆ **086479-6780,** mobile; www.komooksivalai.com), which stands on a dramatic spur of land with a beach on both sides; rooms start at 4,000B. Finally, on gorgeous **Ko Kradan,** the best place to stay is the new **Seven Seas Resort** (✆ **07520-3389;** www.sevenseasresort.com), where rooms and villas go for 6,600B to 12,000B.

11

Central Thailand

Going north from Bangkok, travelers who trace the route of the Chao Phraya River will feel as if they are traveling back in time. Starting with the ruins of Ayutthaya, as you go north, you will discover a series of former capitals: first **Ayutthaya,** then **Lopburi.** Farther north, the nation's most famous architectural wonder, **Sukhothai,** is traditionally considered the seat of the first Thai kingdom, from 1238. Beyond Sukhothai, to the north, is the land once called Lanna, or the Land of a Million Rice Fields. This distinct ancient kingdom meandered between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai (chapters 12–14), and brought totally different customs and architecture.

Central Thailand is also the country's "Great Rice Bowl," known for its agricultural abundance. Winding rivers cut through a mosaic of rice fields, and smaller villages and towns provide a window into the heart of Thailand's rural culture. If you have the time, the most atmospheric way to travel from Bangkok to Ayutthaya is by boat. It's also a short ride by train, and many make the hop to Lopburi before going on to **Phitsanulok,** the commercial and transportation hub of the Central Plains. Farther west, bordering Myanmar (Burma), the town of **Mae Sot** is surrounded by refugee camps, which, for years, have been offering humanitarian aid to the Burmese. Travelers can also choose to continue north to Chiang Mai by road or rail from Phitsanulok.

1 AYUTTHAYA ★★

76km (47 miles) N of Bangkok

Ayutthaya is one of Thailand's travel highlights. Many travelers take the day tour from Bangkok, which allows about 3 hours at the sites (the majority of these lie inside the Historical Park), but for folks with a strong interest in archaeological ruins, Ayutthaya justifies an overnight or more.

From its establishment in 1350 by King U Thong (Ramathibodi I) until its fall to the Burmese in 1767, Ayutthaya was the capital of Siam, home to 33 kings and numerous dynasties. At its zenith and until the mid–18th century, Ayutthaya was a majestic city with three palaces and 400 temples on an island threaded by canals. The former capital rivaled European cities in splendor and was a source of marvel for foreigners.

Then, in 1767, after a 15-month siege, the town was destroyed by the Burmese. Today there is little left but ruins and rows of headless Buddhas where once an empire thrived. The temple compounds are still awe-inspiring even in disrepair, and a visit here is memorable and a good starting point for those drawn to the relics of history.

The architecture of Ayutthaya is a fascinating mix of styles. Tall, ornate spires, called *prangs,* point to ancient Khmer (Cambodian) influence (best seen in Bangkok at Wat Arun). These bear a resemblance to the architecture of Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. The pointed stupas are ascribed to the Sukhothai style.

Getting There

BY TRAIN Trains depart at 7am, 8:30am and 9:25am daily from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **1690;** trip time 1½ hr.; 66B first class, 35B second class; 15B third class).

BY BUS Buses leave every 15 minutes from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** on Kampaengphet 2 Rd., Mo Chit (✆ **02936-2841**), from 4:30am to 7:30pm (trip time 1½ hr.). Rates run from 50B for second class.

BY MINIBUS Minibuses leave every half-hour from Victory Monument (on the BTS). They cost around 60B and take just an hour to arrive.

BY BOAT All-day river cruises are a popular option to and from Ayutthaya, and there are a number of companies making the connection. **Grand Pearl Cruises** (✆ **02861-0255;** www.grandpearlcruise.com) runs a huge floating diner-cum–dance club; it can be booked through most hotels. Departure points are at River City pier (off Charoen Krung [New] Rd.), daily at approximately 7:30am. Day trips involve a morning air-conditioned coach ride to the ancient city and then a return by boat, where a buffet lunch is served; the cost is 1,900B.

The most luxurious way to travel upriver is aboard the *Manohra Song,* a renovated teak rice barge, or its newer and even more exclusive sister, the *Manohra Dream.* For reservations, call **Manohra Cruises** at **02476-0022,** ext. 1750 (www.manohracruises.com). Three-day, two-night trips on the Song leave the hotel pier every Monday and Thursday, while private trips on the *Dream* can be arranged to leave any time. The *Song* has four staterooms with en suite bathrooms, while the *Dream* has two large rooms with A/C, full showers, and king-size beds. Each ship's crew serves cocktails, snacks, and Thai meals in its covered lounge. The trip includes a stop and elephant ride at Wat Nivet, in Ayutthaya. Inclusive of meals, tours, and transfers (but not alcohol), the *Song* runs at a steep 69,000B for a double stateroom, while the *Dream* costs a hefty 200,000B for the entire boat (maximum 4 people). Reservations should be made well in advance.

Orientation

Ayutthaya's old city is surrounded by a canal fed by three rivers—Chao Phraya, Lopburi, and Pasak—and thus is often referred to as the "island." The main ferry pier is located on the east side of the island, just opposite the train station. The Bangkok bus makes its last stop at the station opposite the Siam Commercial Bank Building, off Chao Prom Road in downtown.

Visitor Information

There is a **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)** office at Si Sanphet Road opposite the Chao Sam Phraya National Museum (✆ **03524-6076**). Stop by for maps and other information.

Getting Around

A tuk-tuk from the train station into town will cost about 50B. The best way to visit the ruins is by renting a bicycle (about 50B per day) from any guesthouse or hotel. If you're feeling lazy, negotiate a fee with the rider of a *samlor* (bicycle taxi); enlist the help of hotel staff to negotiate, or this unique and environmentally friendly way of getting around will cost an arm and a leg. A much noisier but faster longtail boat can take you on a 2-hour

The Central Plains
THAILAND
Bangkok
0 20 mi
0 20 km
N
Sgt. Maj. Thavee Folk Museum/Buranathai Buddha Image Factory 1
Ramakhamhaeng National Museum 2
The Royal Palace (Sukhothai) 2
Taksin Maharat (Krabak Yai) National Park 3
Wat Mahatat (Sukhothai) 2
Wat Yai (Phitsanulok) 1
Airport
LAOS
Uttaradit
Si Satchanalai Historic Park
Si Satchanalai
Mae Phrik
Sawankhalok
Tin Tok
Khwae Noi River
Dan Sai
Phichai
DONG PHAYA YEN
Nakhon Thai
203
Nan River
Sukhothai Historical Park
New Sukhothai
Yom River
12
Lom Kao
Tak
105
Phitsanulok
Wang Thong
Lom Sak
Mae Sot
(50 mi/80 km)
101
Ping River
Yom River
Phra Cave
Pa Sak River
1
Kamphaeng Phet
Phichit
21
117
11
Phetchabun
Pong Nam Ron
Pro Prathap Chang
Taphan Hin
Ayutthaya
Chon Daen
113
Khlong Khlung

trip to the main sights for about 800B for up to eight people (arrange this through your hotel, or look for the boat operators by the pier at the northeast end of the island, near the night market). You can also hire a tuk-tuk, with a fixed fee of 200B per hour for temple tours. There is also regular minibus service between Ayutthaya and the pretty 19th-century palaces at Bang Pa-In, departing from Chao Prom Market on the road of the same name; the trip takes 50 minutes and costs 30B.

Fast Facts

Bank of Ayudhya (which uses a different spelling of the city's name) has a branch on U Thong Road next to the ferry pier, across the river from the train station, and there are plenty of ATMs in the city. The main **post office** is also on U Thong Road in the northeast corner of town (but any hotel or guesthouse can help with posting mail). A number of shops on Naresuan Road Soi 1 offer **Internet** service for 30B per hour.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The bulk of the historical sites here are concentrated on the "island," with ancient ruins interspersed with the modern buildings that have risen around them. The Ayutthaya Historical Park lies in the center of the island, but the sites below are just a few of many, and a guide can be helpful (contact any hotel front desk to arrange one).

Most temples sell tickets until 4:30pm and close at 5pm. If you plan to visit several temples, there is a package ticket that costs 220B and is valid for 30 days, and permits entrance to all temples mentioned below except Wat Na Phra Meru and Wat Chai Mongkol. Though you can't go inside the temples after dark, several of the exteriors are dramatically lit at night, and worth seeing on their own. Some hotels even arrange night tours to look at these illuminations. Brightly caparisoned elephants are on hand for short rides around the center of the ancient city, and cost 500B for 30 minutes.

Museums

Ayutthaya Historical Study Center As a resource for students, scholars, and the public, this center presents displays of the ancient city, including models of the palace and the port area and reconstructions of ships and architectural elements, as well as a fine selection of historical objects.

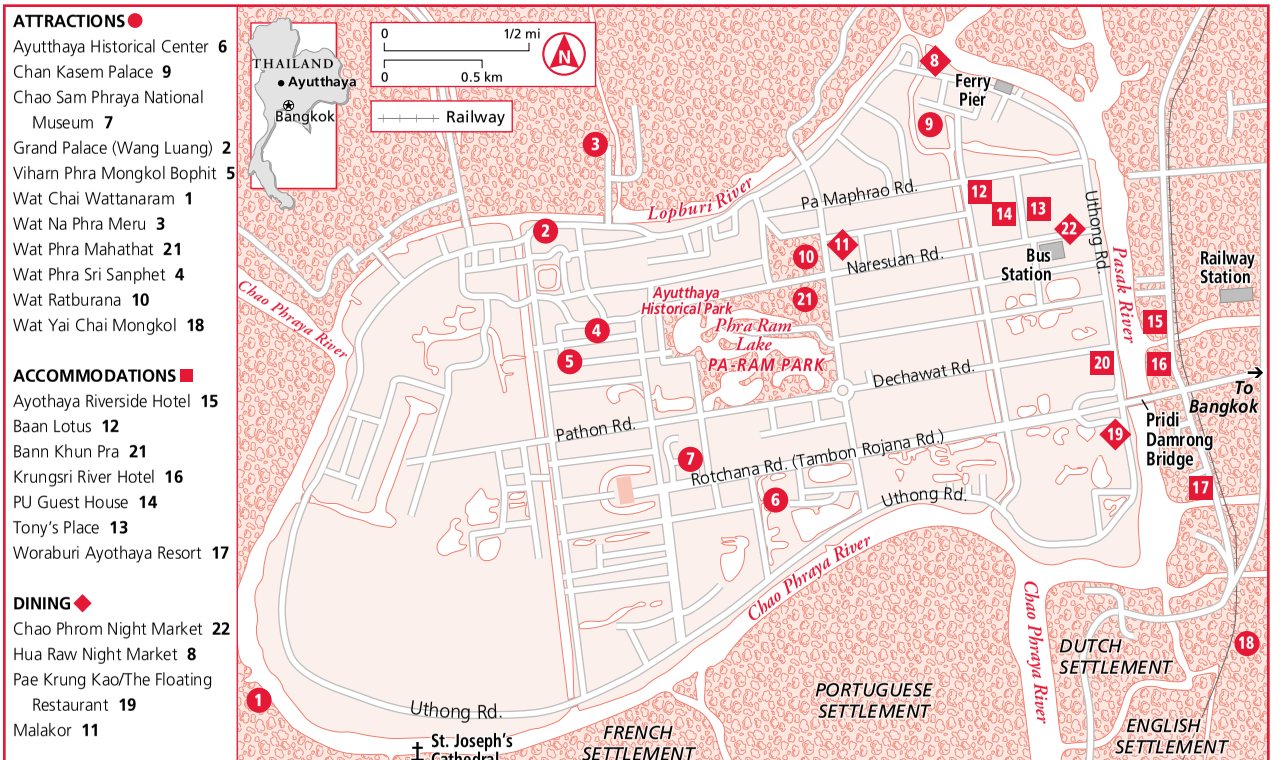
Rotchana Rd. ✆ **03524-5124.** Admission 100B, students 50B. Mon–Fri 9am–4:30pm; Sat–Sun 9am–5pm.

Chan Kasem Palace ★ Housing the **Chantharakasem National Museum,** the impressive Chan Kasem Palace was built in 1577 by King Maha Thamaraja (the 17th Ayutthaya monarch) for his son, who became King Naresuan. It was destroyed, but was later restored by King Mongkut (Rama IV), who stayed there whenever he visited Ayutthaya. On display are gold artifacts, jewelry, carvings, Buddha images, and domestic and religious objects from the 13th to the 17th century.

Northeast part of the island. ✆ **03525-1586.** Admission 100B. Wed–Sun 9am–4pm.

Chao Sam Phraya National Museum ★★ This museum, one of Thailand's largest, boasts a comprehensive collection of antique bronze Buddha images, carved panels, religious objects, and other local artifacts. It's close to the Ayutthaya Historical Center (see above) and across from the TAT office.

Rotchana Rd. (1½ blocks west of the center near the junction of Si Sanphet Rd.). ✆ **03524-1587.** Admission 100B. Wed–Sun 9am–4pm.


ATTRACTIONS
Ayutthaya Historical Center 6
Chan Kasem Palace 9
Chao Sam Phraya National Museum 7
Grand Palace (Wang Luang) 2
Viharn Phra Mongkol Bophit 5
Wat Chai Wattanaram 1
Wat Na Phra Meru 3
Wat Phra Mahathat 21
Wat Phra Sri Sanphet 4
Wat Ratburana 10
Wat Yai Chai Mongkol 18
ACCOMMODATIONS
Ayothaya Riverside Hotel 15
Baan Lotus 12
Bann Khun Pra 21
Krungsri River Hotel 16
PU Guest House 14
Tony's Place 13
Woraburi Ayothaya Resort 17
DINING
Chao Phrom Night Market 22
Hua Raw Night Market 8
Pae Krung Kao/The Floating Restaurant 19
Malakor 11
THAILAND
Ayutthaya
Bangkok
0 1/2 mi
0 0.5 km
N
Railway
Lopburi River
Pa Maphrao Rd.
Naresuan Rd.
Ferry Pier
Bus Station
Uthong Rd.
Pasak River
Railway Station
Chao Phraya River
Ayutthaya Historical Park
Phra Ram Lake
PA-RAM PARK
Dechawat Rd.
Pathon Rd.
Rotchana Rd. (Tambon Rojana Rd.)
Uthong Rd.
To Bangkok
Pridi Damrong Bridge
Chao Phraya River
DUTCH SETTLEMENT
PORTUGUESE SETTLEMENT
ENGLISH SETTLEMENT
FRENCH SETTLEMENT
Uthong Rd.
St. Joseph's Cathedral

Grand Palace Sometimes called Wang Luang, this palace lies in ruins, having been completely destroyed by the Burmese in the late 1700s. Located in the northwestern section of the city, the foundations of the three main buildings can still be made out, and the size of the compound is impressive.

Si Sanpet Rd., in the northwest part of the city, near Wat Phra Si Sanphet. Admission 50B. Daily 8am–5pm.

Viharn Phra Mongkon Bophit ★ Home to Thailand's largest seated bronze Buddha, this cozy sanctuary was reconstructed in the 1950s. The area was originally designated for royal creation ceremonies, and the *viharn* (assembly hall) was later constructed to house the Buddha image.

West of Wat Phra Mahathat and near Wat Si Sanphet. Free admission. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Chai Wattanaram A long bike ride from the other main temple sites, in the southwest of the city, this *wat* (temple) is an excellently preserved example of Khmer architecture in the Ayutthaya period. You can climb to the steep steps of the central *prang* for beautiful views. Its intact structure offers visitors a good sense of what a working temple might have looked like some 300 years ago.

Opposite bank of the Chao Phraya River, southwest of town. Admission 50B. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Na Phra Meru Located on the Lopburi side of the river, Wat Na Phra Meru survived Ayutthaya's destruction in 1767 because it was used as a base for the invading Burmese army. It's worth visiting to see the black-stone Buddha dating from the Mon (Dvaravati) period, as well as the central sanctuary, with the principal 1.8m-tall (6-ft) Buddha and stunning vaulted ceilings supported by ornate columns. A Burmese king died here when his cannon backfired while he was attempting an attack.

Across the Lopburi River, north of the Grand Palace area. Admission 50B. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Phra Mahathat ★★ The most striking of all of the temples in Ayutthaya, Wat Phra Mahathat was built in the heart of the city in 1384 during the reign of King Rachatirat. It is typical of Ayutthaya ruins, with large crumbling stupas surrounded by low laterite walls and rows of headless Buddhas. One Buddha head remains a draw for merit-makers and photographers, however—it's embedded in the gnarled trunk of the old tree that has grown to surround it.

Opposite Wat Phra Mahathat stands **Wat Ratburana ★**, built in 1424 and splendidly restored—the towering monuments (both rounded Khmer-style *prangs* and Sukhothai-style pointed *chedis*) have even retained some of their original stucco. In the two crypts, excavators found bronze Buddha images and votive tablets, as well as golden objects and jewelry, many of which are displayed in the Chao Sam Phraya Museum. There are also murals, as well as a frieze of heavenly beings and some Chinese scenes. Both *wats* remain damaged despite restoration.

Along Chee Kun Rd., near the intersection with Naresuan. Admission for each 50B. Daily 8am–5pm.

Wat Phra Si Sanphet ★ Built in the 14th century for private royal use, Si Sanphet lies just south of the raised Grand Palace area. During the heyday of Ayutthaya, this was the city's largest temple, but little now remains apart from brick foundations and three 15th-century, Sri Lankan–style *chedis,* enshrining the ashes of three Ayutthayan kings, which are probably the most photographed sight in the historical park.

Just south of the Grand Palace ruin in the northwest end of the island. Admission 50B. Daily 9am–5pm.

Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon Visible for miles around, the huge, brick *chedi* of Wat Yai is a long walk (or a short bicycle or tuk-tuk ride) southeast of ancient Ayutthaya (across the river and out of town). King U Thong founded the temple in 1357, and the white reclining Buddha near the entrance was built by King Naresuan. The massive pagoda celebrates the defeat of the Burmese at Suphanburi in 1592, and King Naresuan's defeat of the crown prince of Burma in an elephant joust.

East of the city, across the Pridi Damrong Bridge and south on Dusit Rd. Admission 50B. Daily 8am–5pm.

WHERE TO STAY

As most people visit Ayutthaya on a day trip, there are no luxury accommodations available, though there are plenty of acceptable and affordable choices. All along Naresuan Road, which is like a smaller version of Khao San Road in Bangkok, you'll find good budget accommodations; the street gets busy in the high season (Nov–Feb). Try the lively **Tony's Place** (12/18 Naresuan Soi 1; ✆ **03525-2578**), with wireless Internet, or **P.U. Guest House** (20/1 Moo 4, off Naresuan; ✆ **03525-1213**), which has some units with A/C, TV, and minibar.

Moderate

Ayothaya Riverside Hotel Just across from the train station, this is a Thai business-class hotel worth the upgrade from the town's small guesthouses—though it's not particularly special. Their riverside restaurant is a pleasant spot for a drink, and many of their large, clean rooms overlook the river. Five units are available for longer stays.

91 Moo 10, Wat Pako Rd., Ayutthaya 13000 (across from the train station). ✆ **03523-8737.** Fax 03424-4139. www.ayothayariverside.com. 74 units. From 1,050B double; 2,000B suite. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants (one floating at riverside); bike rentals; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Krungsri River Hotel ★ This hotel is within walking distance of the train station and provides probably the best standard of comfort in town. Rooms have large bathrooms with comfortable furnishings and the best look over the river; the hotel also offers a coffee shop and a small pool.

27/2 Rotchana Rd., Ayutthaya 13000 (northeast side of Pridi Damrong Bridge). ✆ **03524-4333.** Fax 03524-3777. www.krungsririver.com. 202 units. From 1,800B double; from 4,413B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; beer garden and pub; babysitting; fitness center w/sauna; high-speed Internet; pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Woraburi Ayothaya Convention Resort Overlooking the Pasak River, this newish hotel offers some of the best facilities in town. It's especially well-suited for large groups. Riverboat dining cruises, complete with floating karaoke fun, are available for up to 100 guests.

89 Watkluay Rd., Ayutthaya 13000. ✆ **03524-9600.** Fax 03524-9625. www.woraburi.com. 170 units. 1,500B–1,950B double; from 2,600B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; coffee shop; fitness center; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

Baan Lotus This lovely restored teak house lies a bit outside the town's main cluster of budget options, but you'll be glad you took the short walk to get there. The welcoming staff makes it a nice place to unwind, as does the large garden and pond, but it's a bit noisy. They also offer tours at night, when the ruins are romantically lit.

20 Pa Maphrao Rd., Ayutthaya 13000. ✆ **03525-1988.** 20 units. 250B single with shared bathroom; 400B double with private bathroom; 600B double A/C with private bathroom. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bikes. *In room:* A/C in some, no phone.

Bann KunPra Bann KunPra is a beautiful riverside teak house converted into comfortable, if very basic, guest quarters. These traditional fan-only rooms are small, with high ceilings and, set around a small common area, exuding a rustic charm. Their open-air candlelit restaurant overlooks the river. ***Note:*** Ask for a room at the back, where it's quieter and there's a river view.

48 Moo 3, U Thong Rd., Ayutthaya 13000. ✆ **03524-1978.** www.bannkunpra.com. 15 units. 250B dorm with shared bathroom; 300B–400B double with shared bathroom; 500B–800B double with private bathroom. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Riverside restaurant; bikes; high-speed Internet. *In room:* No phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Particularly if this is your first stop outside of Bangkok, don't miss the **Hua Raw Night Market,** along the river in the northeast of town, with fresh produce and a wide selection of Thai/Muslim dishes. More central is the **Chao Phrom Night Market** near the pier. Many of the guesthouses along **Naresuan** serve decent Thai fare geared to foreigners, and now Naresuan hosts a few **open-air restaurants** right on the street, a great place to meet, greet, eat, and party late.

Pae Krung Kao/The Floating Restaurant THAI/CHINESE On low floating pallets at riverside, this restaurant allows diners to have great views of passing boats and river life. The satisfying Thai/Chinese stir-fry and curries are further complemented by a tranquil Chinese garden, a strumming balladeer, and candlelight at water's edge.

4 Moo 2, U Thong Rd. (west bank of Pasak River, north of Pridi Damrong Bridge). ✆ **03525-1807.** Main courses 60B–350B. MC, V. Daily 5–10pm.

Malakor THAI/CONTINENTAL Just across from the large temple of Wat Ratburana, Malakor (meaning "papaya") is a good spot to fill up on such Thai dishes as fried rice and noodles, or munch on a burger while taking a break from temple touring. Alternatively, enjoy a cool drink here after a temple sunset, and watch the lights illuminate the towering monuments.

Chee Kun Rd. (across from Wat Ratburana). No phone. Main courses 50B–120B. No credit cards. Daily 9:30am–midnight.

SIDE TRIPS FROM AYUTTHAYA

Bang Pa-In

Only 61km (38 miles) north of Bangkok, this delightful royal palace is usually combined with Ayutthaya in most 1-day tours and is accessible by minivan. Not all the buildings are open to the public, but the elegant colonial architecture makes a fascinating contrast with Ayutthaya's crumbling temples.

The 17th-century temple and palace at Bang Pa-In were originally built by Ayutthaya's King Prasat Thong, later abandoned when the capital moved in the late 1700s, and then rebuilt by King Chulalongkorn in the late 1800s.

The architecture is Thai with strong European influences. In the center of the small lake, **Phra Thinang Aisawan Thippa-At** is an excellent example of classic Thai style. Behind it, in Versailles style, are the former **king's apartments,** which today serve as a hall for state ceremonies. The **Phra Thinang Wehat Chamrun,** also noteworthy, is a Chinese-style building (open to the public), where court members generally lived during the rainy and cool seasons. Also worth visiting is the **Phra Thinang Withun Thatsuna,** an observatory on a small island that affords a fine view of the countryside.

2 LOPBURI

77km (48 miles) N of Ayutthaya; 153km (95 miles) N of Bangkok; 224km (139 miles) S of Phitsanulok

Lopburi is famous for its 14th- to 17th-century temple ruins, as much as for its sometimes-very-aggressive troupes of monkeys that call them home. The town hosted kings and emissaries from around the world some 400 years ago, and archaeological evidence suggests a highly developed Buddhist society was here as early as the 11th century. These days, Lopburi is a popular day trip from Ayutthaya or a good stopover on the way north.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

Lopburi is along Highway 1 just past Saraburi (connect with Lopburi via Hwy. 3196 to Rte. 311). The fastest way to go straight there from Bangkok is by minivan from Victory Monument (accessible by BTS) for 100B. Vans leave when full from in front of Rachavithee Hospital. Regular buses connect to Lopburi via Ayutthaya from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2841**) for the same price. Numerous trains make daily connection with Lopburi via Ayutthaya from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **1690**), from 28B upward.

Information & Orientation

The **TAT Office** is located in a teak house built in the 1930s just a short walk from the train station (follow the signs) on Ropwat Phrathat Road (✆ **03642-2768**). They have a useful map and can point you to sites within walking distance.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

You should visit Lopburi by approaching its attractions in a clockwise circle pattern. From the train station, stop in to **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** just out front. Built in 1257, Mahathat is a stunning ruin, much like the temples of Ayutthaya (admission 30B; daily 7am–5pm).

Directly west of the TAT, the large complex of **King Narai's Palace** was built in 1666 and combines a large museum of Lopburi antiquities with the *wats* and palace of the king. When nearby Ayutthaya was little more than a marsh, King Narai hosted emissaries from around the world (note the many Islamic-style doorways). The museum now houses displays of Thai rural life and traditions from weaving and agriculture to shadow puppetry (admission 150B; Wed–Sun 8:30am–4:30pm). After leaving the museum, take some time to saunter around the atmospheric grounds around the palace.

From Narai's palace, head north through the town's small streets and market areas to **Wat Sao Thong Thong,** which houses a large golden Buddha and fine Khmer and Ayutthaya period statues. Heading farther north brings you to **Ban Vichayen,** the manicured ruins of the fine housing built for visiting dignitaries (admission 50B; Wed–Sun 9am–4pm).

Going east along Vichayen Road, toward the town center, the three connected towers at **Phra Prang Sam Yot** are stunning examples of the Khmer influence in what is known as "Lopburi style." This is the site where you'll find the town's famous ***macaques*** (monkeys) most hours of the day (admission 30B; daily 7am–5pm). Be careful around these mischievous apes: They have been known to get aggressive and can be very dangerous. You can take pictures, but keep a tight grip on your camera, and don't carry any food.

Reaching Prang Sam Yot brings you full circle back to the train tracks just north of the station. If you're in Lopburi in late spring, ask about the occasional ***macaque* banquets,** where a formal table is set for the little beasts, who tear it to bits—they've no manners at all. Most days they are fed at a temple just east of Sam Yot, called **San Phra Khan** (across the train tracks). Groups of the mischievous animals trapeze along the high wires and swoop down on shop owners armed with sticks, who keep a close eye on outdoor merchandise. It's a different kind of rush hour altogether.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Few stay in little Lopburi, instead visiting the town on a day trip from Ayutthaya or as a brief stopover on the way to points north. If you do choose to stay here, try the **Lopburi Inn Resort** (144 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **03642-0777**), with rooms from 1,200B, with A/C, TV, and breakfast.

There are lots of small open-air restaurants in and around town. One of the best options is the friendly, air-conditioned **Thai Sawang** (11/8 Sorasak Rd.; ✆ **03641-1881**), just southeast of the main entrance to King Narai's Palace. They do decent Western breakfasts as well as Thai and Vietnamese dishes such as *bun hoi* (noodles and pork) at very reasonable prices.

3 PHITSANULOK

377km (234 miles) N of Bangkok; 93km (58 miles) SE of Sukhothai

Phitsanulok is a bustling agricultural, transportation, and military center, with a population of over 100,000, nestled on the banks of the Nan River. It is the crossroads of Thailand, located in the center of the country and roughly equidistant from Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Like most transportation hubs, it's hectic, noisy, and just a stopover for most people on their way to the more charming Sukhothai.

Outside of town, the terrain is flat and the rice paddies are endless—they turn a vivid green in July to August. In winter, white-flowering tobacco and pink-flowering soybeans are planted in rotation. Rice barges, houseboats, and longtail boats ply the Nan and Song Kwai rivers, which eventually connect to the Chao Phraya River and feed into the Gulf of Thailand.

For 25 years, Phitsanulok served as the capital, and it is the birthplace of King Naresuan (the Great), the Ayutthayan king who, on elephant-back, defended Thailand from the Burmese army during the 16th century. Other Ayutthayan kings used Phitsanulok as a staging ground for battles with the Burmese.

When a tragic fire burned most of the city in 1959, one of the only buildings to survive was Wat Yai, famed for its unique statue of Buddha; the temple is now a holy pilgrimage site. For travelers, Wat Yai is worth a visit on the way west to Sukhothai or farther to the Burmese border. Phitsanulok is also famous for the Bangkaew dog, a notoriously fierce and faithful breed that's prized globally, and is thought to have originated from the Bang Rakham District.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (✆ **1566;** www.thaiair.com) has two flights daily to Phitsanulok from Bangkok, one leaving in the morning and the other in the evening (flying

time: about 1 hr.). The Thai Airways office in Phitsanulok is at 209/26–28 Boromtrailokanart Rd. (✆ **05524-2971**). Taxis cost about 200B into town from the airport.

BY TRAIN About 10 trains per day travel between Phitsanulok and Bangkok. The trip time is about 7 hours and costs 449B for an air-conditioned second-class seat. "Rapid" trains can take up to 9 hours, so it is worth the expense to go "sprinter" or "express" class—the difference being that express has sleeping berths. There are six daily connections between Phitsanulok and Chiang Mai (7 hr.; fare 440B). For information and reservations, call Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **1690**), **Chiang Mai Railway Station** (✆ **05324-5363**), or the **Phitsanulok Railway Station** (✆ **05525-8005**).

In front of the station in Phitsanulok, throngs of *samlors* (pedicabs) and motorcycle taxis wait to take you to your hotel. The station is right in town, so expect to pay just 50B to get where you need to go. The bidding will start at around 100B; smile and get ready to haggle.

BY BUS Standard air-conditioned buses leave daily every hour for the trip to Phitsanulok from Bangkok from 7am to midnight (trip time 6 hr.; about 430B). The VIP bus leaves at midnight and is about the same price; the wide seats recline enough to get a decent sleep, and the overnight trip is a timesaver. Buses depart from Chiang Mai in similar numbers. Frequent non-A/C buses connect with Sukhothai. The intercity bus terminal in Phitsanulok is 2km (1¼ miles) east of town on Highway 12 (about 50B by tuk-tuk or taxi). Contact **Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2841**), the **Arcade Bus Station in Chiang Mai** (✆ **05324-2664**), or the **Phitsanulok Bus Terminal** (✆ **05521-2090**).

Visitor Information

The **TAT office** (✆ **05525-2742**) has maps and basic information, but is inconveniently located on Boromtrailokanart Road, 2 blocks south of the central clock tower, down a small side street. Most hotels also offer free city maps.

Orientation

The town is fairly compact, with the majority of services and sights for tourists concentrated along or near the east bank of the Nan River. Naresuan Road extends from the railway station and crosses the river from the east over the town's main bridge. Wat Yai is north of the bridge and just a hitch north of busy Highway 12. The main market, featuring souvenirs during the day and food stalls at night, is just south of the bridge on riverside Phutta Bucha Road. One landmark is the clock tower at the southern end of the commercial district, Boromtrailokanart Road.

Getting Around

BY TUK-TUK & SONGTAEW Tuk-tuks (called taxis here) stop near the bus and train stations. Negotiate for an in-town fare, usually about 50B. *Songtaews* (covered pickup trucks) follow regular routes outside of town.

BY BUS There's a well-organized city bus system with a main terminal south of the train station on A-Kathotsarot Road. Trips are about 10B, but you would do just as well to hire tuk-tuks or taxis.

There are frequent (every half-hour 6am–6pm) buses from the intercity bus terminal east of town to **New Sukhothai** (trip time 1 hr.; fare 42B)

BY HIRED MINIVAN Any hotel in Phitsanulok can arrange minivan tours in the area and to Sukhothai. Expect to pay around 2,000B with a driver, plus fuel.

BY TRAM The **Phitsanulok Tour Tramway** offers a 45-minute sightseeing tour (adults 30B, kids 20B), departing from Wat Yai from 9am to 3pm and returning to the temple.

BY RENTAL CAR **Budget** (✆ **05530-1020**) and **Avis** (✆ **05524-2060**) have offices at the airport.

Special Events

The **Buddha Chinarat Festival** is held annually on the 6th day of the waxing moon in the 3rd lunar month (usually late Jan or early Feb). Then, Phitsanulok's Wat Yai is packed with well-wishers, dancers, monks and abbots, children, and tourists, all converging on the temple grounds for a 6-day celebration.

Fast Facts

Bangkok Bank has an after-hours (until 8pm) exchange service at 35 Naresuan Rd. The **General Post Office** is on Phuttha Bucha Road, along the river 2 blocks north of Naresuan Road. The **Overseas Call Office** is on the second floor of the post office and offers **Internet** service at about 30B per hour.

WHERE TO STAY

In addition to the hotels listed below, the bright, clean rooms at **Lithai Guest House** (73 Phayalithai Rd.; ✆ **05521-9626**) are a welcome addition to the city's accommodations options; the price (250B–350B single; 460B double) includes breakfast, except for the cheapest fan rooms. South of town, near the airport, the **Phitsanulok Youth Hostel** (38 Sanambin Rd.; ✆ **05524-2060**) has basic rooms starting from 120B for a dorm room and 300B for a double.

Moderate

Amarin Lagoon Hotel ★ The most attractive resort hotel in the area is the Amarin Lagoon; it's a few kilometers east of the town center, but the hotel operates a shuttle service into town. Rooms are spacious, attractive, and quiet. There is a huge pool and spa and the hotel offers business amenities such as Wi-Fi; plus, it's only 40 minutes from a golf course.

52/299 Moo 6, Praongkhao Rd., Phitsanulok 65000. ✆ **05522-0999.** Fax 05522-0944. www.amarinlagoonhotel.com. 301 units. 2,000B–3,500B double; from 8,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; fitness center; pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Topland Hotel and Convention Center ★★ Adjoining the town's largest shopping center and just a stone's throw from Wat Yai, this is one of the most comfortable, well-run hotels in Phitsanulok and has a convenient location. Service is snappy, though the lobby can be a pretty busy place at checkout time. Deluxe rooms are tidy, and bathrooms are large, with marble counters and wood trim.

68/33 Akathodsarod St., Phitsanulok 65000. ✆ **05524-7800.** Fax 05524-7815. www.toplandhotel.com. 253 units. From 2,000B double; from 5,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; airport transfers; fitness center; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Pailyn Hotel This 12-story business hotel is a reasonable choice for downtown lodging, with sweeping views of the surrounding countryside from the top floors. The bright marble lobby gives the place some panache, and rooms are clean, fairly quiet for the location, and stylishly decked out with rattan decor. Rooms are priced according to size; upper standards are slightly smarter. Bathrooms are standard, with no frills.

38 Borom Trailokanart Rd., Phitsanulok 65000. ✆ **05525-2411.** Fax 05522-5237. www.pailynhotelsgroup.com. 247 units. From 1,000B double; from 3,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar and disco; babysitting; high-speed Internet; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE

No fine dining options exist in Phitsanulok; lots of small eateries are in and around the train station, though. Be sure to try the local specialty, *khaew tak,* sun-dried banana baked with honey; packages are sold everywhere and cost just 30B. At the **Night Bazaar** you can enjoy "flying vegetables"—morning-glory greens sautéed, tossed high in the air, and adeptly caught in the chef's pan.

Pae Fa Thai Floating Restaurant THAI The best of many similar places along the riverbank, just in front of the main tourist attraction, Wat Yai, Pae Pha Thai is a friendly, casual eatery with no pretense. Indulge in the kind of spread you might find in a Thai home—*tod man plaa* (deep-fried fish cakes), *kai phad kaprow* (chicken with basil and chili), *tom yum* soup, and a whole fish encrusted with garlic and lemon. Dishes seem to be made all the better by being served at water's edge.

Phutta Bucha Rd. (on Nan River in front of Wat Yai). ✆ **05524-2743.** Main courses 80B–160B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

PHITSANULOK AFTER DARK

You won't find much in the way of nightlife in Phitsanulok, but for a beverage or a late snack set to noisy Thai pop music, stop by the **Tree House** (✆ **05521-2587**), a small bar with an adjoining garden across from the Phitsanulok Thani Hotel.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Most use Phitsanulok as a jumping-off point for Sukhothai, but there are a few sights in the town proper—with Wat Yai being the foremost among them (see below).

The Sgt. Maj. Thawee Folk Museum ★ This small campus of low-slung pavilions houses a private collection of antique items from Thai rural life. Farming and trapping equipment, household items, and old photographs of the city are lovingly displayed by the sergeant major, with descriptions in English. Just across the road is the **Buranathai Buddha Casting Foundry** (admission free), where you can see the carving and casting of large Buddhas, most of which are copies of the Chinarat Buddha image from Wat Yai. The foundry is also operated by Dr Thawee, as is the adjacent **Thai Bird Garden** (daily 8:30am–5pm; admission 50B), which contains examples of some of the country's most colorful species, including a hornbill and a silver pheasant.

26/43 Wisut Kasat Rd. ✆ **05521-2749.** Admission 50B adults, 20B students. Tues–Sun 8:30am–4:30pm.

Wat Chulamanee The oldest temple in the area and the site of the original city, Wat Chulamanee is still an active monastery. The temple was restored in the 1950s and

 is admired for its fine laterite *prang* and elaborate stucco. It's best to have your own transport, if you want to visit, or you may find yourself stranded due to limited public transportation.

7km (4 1/3 miles) south of the Nakon Sawan Hwy., on Boromtrailokanart Rd. Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–7pm.

Wat Yai ★★ This temple's full name is **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat,** and it's one of the most important temples in the country. The Phra Buddha Chinarat statue is a bronze image cast in 1357 under the Sukhothai king Mahatmmaracha; its most distinctive feature is its flamelike halo *(mandorla),* which symbolizes spiritual radiance. Only the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok (p. 124) is more highly revered by the Thai people.

The *viharn* housing the Buddha is a prized example of traditional Thai architecture, with three eaves, overlapping one another to emphasize the nave, and graceful black and gold columns. The mother-of-pearl inlaid doors leading into the chapel were added in 1576 as a gift from King Borommakot of Ayutthaya. Inside, you'll discover an Italian marble floor, two painted *thammas* (pulpits), and murals illustrating the life of Buddha. Other than the *viharn* and *bot* (ordination hall), the *wat*'s most distinctive architectural feature is the Khmer-style *prang,* rebuilt by King Boromtrailokanart. It houses the relic from which the *wat* takes its name; *mahathat* means "great relic." The small museum houses a collection of Sukhothai- and Ayutthaya-era Buddhas.

The *wat* is always packed with worshipers paying their respects and making offerings. Conservative dress is obligatory—this means clothing that covers the shoulders, elbows, and knees; you'll also need to remove your shoes before entering the *wat.*

1 block north of the Hwy. 12 bridge and just a short walk east of the river. Admission 50B. Wat daily 6am–6pm (during the Buddha Chinarat Festival 6am–midnight); museum daily Wed–Sun 9am–4pm.

4 SUKHOTHAI ★★★ & SI SATCHANALAI HISTORICAL PARKS

Sukhothai: 58km (36 miles) E of Phitsanulok; Si Satchanalai: 56km (35 miles) N of Sukhothai

The emergence of Sukhothai ("Dawn of Happiness" in Pali) in 1238 is considered the birth of the first Thai kingdom. Under King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, Sukhothai's influence covered a larger area than that of present-day Thailand. The ruins here are more intact and less encroached upon than those in Ayutthaya, making this the country's most gratifying historical site.

The **Sukhothai Historical Park,** the main attraction, is a World Heritage Site situated 12km (7½ miles) west of the town of Sukhothai, also known as **New Sukhothai.** Not surprisingly, the new town lacks any of Old Sukhothai's historic grandeur.

Si Satchanalai, north of New Sukhothai, is another legacy of the Sukhothai kingdom. Visitors often enjoy these ruins the most, and they are certainly worth the 1-day detour.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE From Bangkok, **Bangkok Airways** (✆ **02270-6699;** www.bangkokair.com) operates at least one daily flight connecting Bangkok with Sukhothai through their private airport 27km (17 miles) from Sukhothai. Contact them at the Sukhothai airport

(✆ **05564-7224**). Bangkok Airways can arrange transfers to New Sukhothai by minivan for 80B, or for 300B directly to the Old City.

BY TRAIN The nearest rail station is in Phitsanulok (p. 284). From there, you can connect by local air-conditioned bus, leaving hourly for New Sukhothai (trip time 1 hr.; fare 54B) from the intercity terminal on Highway 12.

BY BUS Three daily first-class, nonstop, air-conditioned buses leave from Bangkok (10am–10:30pm; trip time 7½ hr.; fare 407B for VIP bus), departing from the **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**). There are also more arduous second-class buses, but avoid them unless you're desperate. Several air-conditioned buses leave daily from Chiang Mai's **Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**) for the 5½-hour trip (fare 218B for second class with A/C).

Visitor Information

The **TAT** office in Sukhothai is at 130 Charot Withi Thong Rd. (✆ **05561-6228**). There's a tourist police point (✆ **1155**) opposite the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum. The main police station is at the junction of Singhawat and Si Intharathit roads. The **Sukhothai Hospital** (✆ **05561-0280**) is at 2/1 Jarot Withithong Rd. The **post office** is down near the river on Nikhon Kasem Road.

Orientation

Sukhothai Historical Park (or *muang kao,* "old city") lies 12km (7½ miles) east of **New Sukhothai.** Built along the banks of the Yom River, New Sukhothai has lots of accommodation options, though there are now several fancy places near the Historical Park and in the surrounding countryside. The selection is growing—whether you're looking for laid-back cool or decked-out comfort, you're likely to find your desired niche. **Si Satchanalai Historic Park,** also along the Yom River, is 56km (35 miles) north of New Sukhothai.

Special Events

The **Loy Krathong** ★★ festival here is an exceptional spectacle. This 3-day festival is held on the full moon of the 12th lunar month (usually Nov). Crowds gather at rivers, *klongs* (canals), lakes, and temple fountains to drop small banana-leaf floats or *krathong,* bearing candles, incense, a flower, and a coin. As the *krathong* glides downstream, it symbolizes a letting go of the previous year's sins and unhappiness. Sukhothai celebrates with fireworks, traditional dancing, and a music and light show in the Historical Park; book early for VIP seats with the best view.

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive

Ananda Museum Gallery Hotel ★

Located to the east of New Sukhothai town (on the opposite side from the temples), Ananda is a bit remote for some, but it is well designed, with relaxing earth tones and lots of Thai elements, giving it plenty of character. Artisan handicrafts and antiques are on display in the gallery.

10 Moo 4, Bantum Muang, Sukhothai 64000. ✆ **05562-2428.** Fax 05562-1885. www.anandasukhothai.com. 33 units. 3,750B–4,650B double; 9,600 suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar and coffee lounge (in the gallery); high-speed Internet; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Pailyn Sukhothai Hotel ★ Pailyn's biggest advantage is its location, about halfway between the town and temples. The four-story structure is bright, modern, and comfortable, with a granite lobby, carpeted rooms, and a small pool and sun deck. Higher rates bring minibars, fridges, and TVs. The suites are enormous, but their bathrooms are a shade on the small side.

10/2 Moo 1, Jarot Withithong Rd., Sukhothai 64210. ✆ **05561-3310.** Fax 05561-3317. www.pailynhotelsgroup.com. 238 units. 1,500B double; from 2,700B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; dance club; fitness center; high-speed Internet; pool; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, no phone.

Ruean Thai Hotel ★ Stay once at this charming establishment and it's likely you'll keep coming back. Rooms surround a pool, and the Thai-style design employs lots of wood and pretty antiques. Bathrooms are very spacious and there's a garden in which to kick back. (Watch out for the resident rabbits.) They also offer useful extras such as complimentary breakfast and transfer to the bus station (free) or airport (350B).

181/20 Soi Pracharuammit, Jarot Withithong Rd., Sukhothai 64000. ✆ **05561-2444.** www.rueanthaihotel.com. 28 units. 1,200B–3,200B double. MC, V. Rates include breakfast. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; sports-equipment rentals; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Tharaburi Resort ★★★ After being remodeled from a simple backpacker pad to a high-class haven, this is now Sukhothai's most stylish resort, with rooms covering a huge range of prices. Luxurious double rooms and suites are fitted with Jacuzzis, flatscreen TVs, and spacious balconies. The original guesthouse, Baan Thai, can accommodate a large family with its seven rooms and four bathrooms. Individual rooms in the house are also available.

11/3 Srisomboon Rd., Sukhothai 64000. ✆ **05569-7132.** Fax 05569-7131. www.tharaburiresort.com. 20 units. 1,500B–1,900B double with A/C and shared bathroom; 4,800B double with Jacuzzi and DVD; 6,000B family suite with 2 bedrooms, 1 bathroom; 8,000B suite; 10,000B house (incl. 7 bedrooms, 4 bathrooms). MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Moderate

Lotus Village ★ Value This place has a spa, a boutique, and an abundance of style, yet the prices are surprisingly affordable. Garden paths connect the raised Thai-style bungalows, housing large, sturdy air-conditioned rooms with polished teak. The helpful owners, a Franco-Thai couple, can arrange a tour with a certified guide; plus, it's only a short walk from New Sukhothai's market and town center.

170 Ratchathanee Rd., Sukhothai 64000. ✆ **05562-1484.** Fax 05562-1463. www.lotus-village.com. 28 units. 920B double with fan; 1,150B–1,540B double with A/C; 2,750B family house. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; spa; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C in some, fridge and minibar (in deluxe rooms), no phone.

Sukhothai Heritage Resort ★★ Set in an organic farm right next to Sukhothai Airport, this place offers a quiet, rural retreat (aircraft land here rarely) and the chance to learn more about rice culture at the neighboring research center. Superior rooms in this two-story hotel are not huge but are comfortably furnished, and all rooms look out over one of two inviting pools. Bicycles are on hand for exploring the area and staff can arrange transport to the Historical Park.

999 Moo 2, Tambon Klongkrajong, Sukhothai 64100. ✆ **05564-7655.** www.sukhothaiheritage.com. 68 units. 2,900B–4,200B double; 7,200B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; bike rentals; 2 pools. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Ban Thai Guesthouse Ban Thai is the best budget choice in New Sukhothai, and even if you don't stay in this small guesthouse, you'll want to drop in, have a fruit shake, and peruse maps and the helpful advice book. If you have the cash, splash out on the newer bungalows with air-conditioning and private bathrooms. Great mountain biking tours are on offer daily.

38 Pravet Nakhon Rd., Sukhothai 64000. ✆ **05561-0163.** 8 units. 150B with fan and shared bathroom; 250B bungalow with fan; 500B bungalow with A/C. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; sports-equipment rentals. *In room:* A/C in some, no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Eating in Sukhothai is all about sampling the city's famous dish, *kway tiaw,* or **Sukhothai noodles**—a mouth-watering plate of rice noodles with crispy pork, garlic, green beans, cilantro, chili, and peanuts in a broth seasoned with soy sauce. For the best, try **Baan Kru Iew** on Vichien Chamnong Road; **Kwaytiaw Thai Sukhothai,** on Jarot Withithong Road, close to the Ruean Thai Hotel (see above); or **Ta Bui,** on the left-hand side of the highway on the way to the historical park. New Sukhothai's **night food stalls** (close to the bus stop for the Historical Park) are also good for casual grazing.

Dream Café ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL This is a cozy place bathed in warm, soft light. With its oddball collection of ceramics, memorabilia, and old jewelry, it looks more like an antiques store than a restaurant. In addition to Thai dishes, including many family recipes, Dream also serves excellent European and Chinese cuisine. Try the Sukhothai Fondue, a "cook it yourself" hot pot of meat, veggies, and noodles. Save room for an ice-cream sundae for dessert.

86/1 Singhawat Rd. (center of new city). ✆ **05561-2081.** Main courses 80B–250B. V. Daily 10am–10pm.

EXPLORING SUKHOTHAI ★★★

In 1978, UNESCO named Sukhothai a World Heritage Site, and the Thai government, with international assistance, completed the preservation of these magnificent monuments and consolidated them with an excellent museum into one large park.

Every Saturday night at 10pm, a **"walking street"** outside the historical park comes alive with food, handicrafts, and cultural shows. It's a recent addition to Sukhothai nightlife and worth checking out. Also, from 7 to 8pm on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, there is a **light and sound show** at the park, weather permitting.

GETTING TO THE SITE The easiest way to get to the Sukhothai Historical Park from New Sukhothai is by *songtaew* (cost 15B), which leave around every 15 minutes from Jarot Withithong Road just west of the bridge over the Yom River.

TOURING THE SITE The tuk-tuks that cruise around New Sukhothai can be hired to whiz you out to the monuments on a 4-hour tour around the park for about 500B, but if you have the energy, it's much more rewarding to rent a bike from shops outside the park entrance; prices start at 30B. At peak times, there is a tram service that runs visitors around the central zone for 20B, starting near the national museum. Maps are available at the museum or at the nearby bicycle-rental shops. The park is open daily 8am to 6pm; admission is 100B to the central area within the park walls, with additional charges of 100B for each of the four zones outside the walls of the park. Be sure to bring water and go early in the morning to beat the tour buses. Or consider coming back in the evening with picnic provisions, when it's cooler and the sun is going down.

RAMKHAMHAENG NATIONAL MUSEUM This museum, located in the center of the old city near the park entrance, houses a detailed model of the area, and an admirable display of Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai archaeological finds. Before exploring the temple sites, stop here for maps and information. It's open every day from 9am to 4pm; admission is 150B. Call ✆ **05569-7367** for info.

WAT PHRA MAHATHAT ★★ The most extraordinary monument in the park, this temple is dominated by a 14th-century lotus-bud tower and encircled by a moat. Surrounding its unique Sukhothai-style *chedi* are several smaller towers of Sri Lankan and Khmer influence, and a grouping of Buddhist disciples in the adoration pose. An imposing cast-bronze seated Buddha used to be placed in front of the reliquary (this image, Phra Si Sakaya Muni, was removed in the 18th century to Bangkok's Wat Suthat). Be sure to examine the lowest platform (south side of Wat Phra Mahathat) and its excellent stucco sculpture, the crypt murals, and two elegant Sri Lankan–style stupas at the southeast corner of the site. Some of the best architectural ornamentation in Sukhothai is found on the upper, eastern-facing levels of the pediments in the main reliquary tower. Dancing figures, Queen Maya giving birth to Prince Siddhartha, and scenes from Buddha's life are among the best-preserved details.

WAT SI SAWAI Southwest of the palace, you'll come to this 12th-century Hindu shrine later converted to a Buddhist temple. The architecture is distinctly Khmer, with three Lopburi-style *prangs* commanding center stage.

OTHER MONUMENTS IN THE PARK Circling north, just west of Wat Phra Mahathat, is **Wat Traphang Tong,** set on its own pond. Though little remains other than an attractive *chedi,* the vistas of the surrounding monuments are among the most superb in the park. North of Wat Phra Mahathat is **Wat Chana Songkhram,** where there's a Sri Lankan–style stupa of note. Nearby is **Wat Sa Si,** also on a small island.

Outside the old city walls, **Wat Phra Phai Luang** lies 150m (492 ft.) beyond the northern gate. Originally a Hindu shrine, it housed a *lingam,* a phallic sculpture representing Shiva. To the northwest, **Wat Si Chum** holds one of the more astonishing and beautiful monuments in Sukhothai: a majestic seated Buddha 15m (49-ft.) tall, in the Subduing Mara pose. The fingers of this Buddha, draped over the right knee and frequently smothered with gold leaf, provide one of the country's most iconic images.

A few kilometers west of the old city walls, the ruins of **Wat Saphan Hin** sit atop a hill that's visible for miles. It is worth the steep, 5-minute climb to visit the Phra Attaros Buddha, his right hand raised in the Dispelling Fear pose, and towering above the *wat*'s laterite remains.

LUNCH AT THE HISTORICAL PARK There are a number of small store-front eateries in and among the bike-rental shops and souvenir stands at the gate of the park (just across from Ramkhamhaeng Museum).

EXPLORING SI SATCHANALAI ★

Many people enjoy the secluded ruins at Si Satchanalai even more than those at Sukhothai, so try to make this day trip if you have the time. There is an **information center** at the park, and bicycles (30B) for rent. It's open daily from 8am to 6pm. Admission is 100B.

A LOOK AT THE PAST Si Satchanalai's riverside site was crucial to the development of its famous ceramics industry. More than 1,000 kilns operated along the river, producing

highly prized pots that carried a greenish-gray glaze known as celadon. These were eventually exported throughout Asia. Academics believe that ceramic manufacture began more than 1,000 years ago at Ban Ko Noi (there's a small site museum 6km/3¾ miles north of Satchanalai), and ceramic shards today are sold as souvenirs.

GETTING TO THE SITE Si Satchanalai is north of New Sukhothai on Route 101. Buses from Sukhothai depart every half-hour from the bus stop on Jarot Withithong Road for 38B. Just ask the driver to let you off at *"muang kao"* (old city). There are two stops; the second is closer to the park entrance, across the river. The last bus returns at 4:30pm. A taxi, private car, or guided tour can also be arranged through your hotel or guesthouse.

An adventurous alternative, if you are starting in Bangkok, is to go by train. A daily "Sprinter" express (train 3) runs daily at 10:50am (fare 482B) from Bangkok to Sawankhalok, 20km (12 miles) south of Si Satchanalai park, stopping at Phitsanulok on the way, and arriving at 6pm. The line to Sawankhalok is a spur that King Rama VI had built so that he could visit the ruins at Si Satchanalai, and the well-preserved station seems trapped in a time bubble. The train returns to Bangkok at 7:40pm. It is second class, with air-conditioning but no sleepers, and fare includes dinner and breakfast. For information, call Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **1690**) or the **Phitsanulok Railway Station** (✆ **05525-8005**). From the station, you would need to charter a *songtaew* for the remaining 20km (12 miles).

Seeing the Highlights

WAT CHANG LOM The discovery of presumed relics of Lord Buddha at this site during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng prompted the construction of the temple, an event described in stone inscriptions found at Sukhothai. Thirty-nine elephant buttresses surround a central stupa—it's unusual to find so many elephant forms intact. If you climb the steps to the stupa's terrace, you can admire the 19 Buddhas installed in niches there.

WAT CHEDI JET THAEW Opposite Wat Chang Lom to the south, within sandstone walls, this *wat* is distinguished by a series of lotus-bud towers and rows of *chedis* resembling those at Sukhothai's Wat Phra Mahathat and thought to contain the remains of the royal family.

OTHER MONUMENTS IN THE PARK You can see most of the monuments within the ancient city walls in an hour's drive. Nothing compares to **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat,** located 1km (⅔ mile) southeast of the big bridge and directly adjacent to the footbridge connecting to the main road. The exterior carving and sculpture are superb, particularly the walking Buddha done in relief.

5 TAK PROVINCE: MAE SOT & THE MYANMAR (BURMA) BORDER

Tak: 138km (86 miles) W of Phitsanulok. Mae Sot: 80km (50 miles) W of Tak

Tak Province doesn't get a lot of tourists, possibly because there are no major attractions in the provincial capital, but the region is certainly not lacking in natural beauty, situated as it is at the beginning of the mountainous north. It is home to the **Bhumibol Dam,** the country's largest, and the area is covered in lush forests that offer a quiet retreat at

Taksin Maharat and **Lan Sang** national parks, both about 25km (16 miles) west of Tak. Just a few kilometers from the border with Myanmar (Burma), **Mae Sot** displays all the hallmarks of a small border town. For decades it has played host to camps that take in an endless stream of refugees fleeing from Myanmar, many of whom are from the persecuted Karen tribe. Because of these border tensions, the province is likely to stay relatively undeveloped in terms of tourism for the foreseeable future. Most visitors in Mae Sot are on their way to **Umphang,** some 150km (93 miles) south along one of the country's most hair-raising roads. Umphang boasts **Ti Lor Sui** ★, Thailand's most spectacular waterfall, and some of the best trekking and whitewater rafting in the kingdom, making the arduous journey there worthwhile.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE At the time of this update, **PB Air** (✆ **02326-8000;** www.pbair.com) was operating two flights a week from Bangkok to Mae Sot; the airport is 3km (1¾ miles) west of town, and a taxi to the center should cost around 100B.

BY BUS From Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2841**), first-class, air-conditioned buses leave for **Tak's bus terminal** (✆ **05551-1057**) daily at 9:30pm and 10:30pm. The trip takes 6½ hours and rates are 313B. There are also three second-class trips per day, but travel on those buses can be slow and uncomfortable.

From Bangkok to **Mae Sot's bus terminal** (✆ **05556-3435**), a VIP bus runs four times daily, from 9:30pm to 10:40pm (8 hr.; 613B). First-class buses leave three times daily from 9am to 10:20pm (8 hr.; 415B).

There are also second-class connections from **Phitsanulok's Bus Terminal** (✆ **05521-2090**) to Tak (eight departures daily; trip time: 3 hr.; 90B) and hourly to Mae Sot from 7am to 3pm (5 hr.; 210B).

Privately operated minivans connect Tak and Mae Sot, leaving when they're full (about every half-hour), for about 60B per person. The trip time is 1½ hours. There are good buses operated by the **Green Bus Line** (✆ **1141,** ext. 8000) from Mae Sot to Tak and on to Lampang and Chiang Mai (first-class buses depart daily at 8am from Mae Sot; 6 hr. to Chiang Mai; 304B).

From the bus terminals in Tak and Mae Sot, motorcycle taxis, *samlors,* and *songtaews* wait to take you to any hotel for about 50B. *Songtaews* also make the dizzying 5-hour drive between Mae Sot and Umphang several times daily and charge about 120B.

Visitor Information

Tak has a **TAT** office near the bus terminal, at 193 Taksin Rd. (✆ **05551-4341**).

Special Events

Every year from December 28 to January 3, the **Taksin Maharachanuson Fair** is held in Tak to honor King Taksin the Great. The streets around his shrine (on Taksin Rd., at the north side of town) fill with food vendors, dancers, musicians, and monks. The shrine is decorated with floral wreaths and gold fabric to welcome pilgrims.

Fast Facts

In Tak, there are a handful of **ATMs** along Mahat Thai Bamrung Road, and where it meets Thetsaban 1 Road, there's a **police station.** In Mae Sot, banks with ATMs are

located on the main thoroughfare, on Prasat Withee Road. The **post office** in Mae Sot is on Intharakiri Road diagonally opposite the main police station. There are a number of **Internet** cafes along Intharakiri Road in the center of Mae Sot.

WHERE TO STAY

Tak

Suansin Lanna Garden Resort This property offers excellent value in a city that previously had very few accommodations options. Rooms (doubles and triples) are decorated simply in yellows and creams, with pretty, dark wood furniture, and have TVs and air-conditioning. Plus, the place is clean as a whistle. You can dine outside on the restaurant's delightful, shady terrace.

8 Moo 8, Paholyothin Rd., Tak 63000. ✆ **05589-1333.** www.suansin.com. 76 units. 250B double with fan; 370B double with A/C. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Viang Tak 2 This unremarkable low-rise offers good service and a surprisingly wide range of amenities, including a pool and an Internet cafe. The location isn't bad at all, just a 5-minute tuk-tuk ride from the bus terminal at 236 Jompol Rd. Many rooms have great views across the broad Ping River to fields and mountains in the west, and in the evening the riverside promenade by the hotel buzzes with snack vendors and locals exercising.

236 Chumpon Rd., Tak 63000. ✆ **05551-2507.** www.viangtakriverside.com. 140 units. 950B double; 2,500B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 lounges; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Mae Sot

In addition to the places listed below, Mae Sot has quite a number of small, affordable guesthouses lining the main street, perhaps due in part to the number of itinerant NGO workers passing through town. **DK Hotel** (298/2 Intharakiri Rd., near the police station; ✆ **05553-1699**) is a local business hotel with rooms with fans running 250B and rooms with A/C running 400B. **Ban Thai** (740 Intharakiri Rd.; ✆ **05553-1590**) also offers rooms from 300B.

Centara Mae Sot Hill Resort ★ This contemporary four-story hotel is built in two long wings fanning out from a classy open atrium lobby. This is the highest standard hotel in town and makes for a comfortable base from which to explore the area, though it is a bit of a hike to the town center. The staff is helpful and can arrange tours and onward travel. All rooms have modern amenities and views of the mist-shrouded, wooded hills. Check if the rate you are offered can include breakfast.

100 Asia Rd., Mae Sot, Tak 63110. ✆ **05553-2601.** Fax 05553-2600. www.centarahotelsresorts.com. 120 units. From 2,800B double; from 4,000B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; dance club; lounge; high-speed Internet; 2 pools; room service; 2 outdoor tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

First Hotel Finds ★ First Hotel's dull concrete exterior belies an interior that's like a wood-carved wedding cake, with intricate representations of flora and fauna. Standard rooms have large carved headboards and furnishings, as well as tidy marble bathrooms. It all adds up to a memorable place to stay, right in the town center.

444 Intharakiri Rd., Mae Sot, Tak 63110. ✆ **05553-1233.** Fax 05553-1340. 33 units. 270B double with fan; 450B double with A/C. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Internet. *In room:* A/C in some, TV, no phone.

Dining in Mae Sot

Inexpensive

Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant ★ THAI This little oasis along the Burmese border verges on the surreal, but the food is delicious. Ponds overgrown with lush vegetation surround an enormous central thatched pavilion. Be sure to go to the bathroom, even if you don't have to; these water closets are large grottos with flushable fixtures at odd heights and stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The menu surveys the whole country, with an emphasis on curries and authentic spice. Portions are small, so order up a few dishes, and ask about the daily specials.

382 Moo 9, Maepa, Maesod (head for the Myanmar border, turn north just before the checkpoint, and follow the highway 2km/1¼ miles). ✆ **05553-2483.** Main courses 80B–260B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Krua Canadian INTERNATIONAL This restaurant's name is Thai for "Canadian kitchen," and that's just how it feels—as if you've been invited into the home of Canadian Dave and his wife, Chulee. From this simple, central storefront, they serve hearty breakfasts, local coffee, and a unique tofu burger that is messy and delicious. Drop in for a drink and for some advice on local happenings.

3 Sri Phanit Rd., Mae Sot. ✆ **05553-4659.** Main courses 50B–150B. No credit cards. Daily 7am–10pm.

EXPLORING THE AREA

Along Highway 105, 20km (12 miles) west of Tak, a left turn leads to **Lan Sang National Park** (✆ **05557-7207**), where there are hiking trails and waterfalls, and on weekdays usually no visitors. About 5km (3 miles) farther along H105, a right turn leads to **Taksin Maharat National Park** (✆ **05551-1429**), known as the home of *Krabak Yai,* Thailand's largest tree. A hike brings you to this colossal tree beside a stream—it takes 16 people's stretched arms to wrap around the conifer. Accommodations are available at both parks and admission to each is 200B for adults and 100B for children. For more information, check out the Thai national parks website, www.dnp.go.th.

Mae Sot is perched on the Myanmar border, and the area is always buzzing with trade. The town has a surplus of Burmese woven cotton blankets, lacquerware, jewelry, bronze statues, cotton sarongs, and wicker ware. Business is conducted in Thai baht, U.S. dollars, or Myanmar kyat.

There is a dark side to the border, though: Trade means the movement of not just produce and crafts, but also drugs, precious stones, and women (or children) for prostitution. There's something disquieting about the many European luxury cars parked in front of two-story brick homes lining this village's main street—they hint at the substantial illegal profiteering. Be careful about buying gems unless you know what you're doing; you can find yourself walking away with a handful of plastic and a dent in your wallet. The border also sees a heavy flow of refugees, and there are a number of camps in the surrounding hills. Cynthia Maung, a tireless Karen doctor, runs **Mae Tao clinic** and refugee camp on the outskirts of Mae Sot, helping to treat the thousands who cross this border in search of help. The camp is not open to visitors, but there are ways to get involved. Contact them at P.O. Box 67, Mae Sot, Tak 63110 (✆ **05553-3644**).

The border between Mae Sot (at the town of Rim Moei) and Myawaddy, Myanmar, is open daily from 8am to 4:30pm, and—when relations are good—you can cross the bridge on foot or by car for a day for 500B. You'll need to leave your passport at the Myanmar immigration booth, and pick it up by 4:30pm. Many visitors cross just for a walk around Myawaddy and a glimpse of Burmese culture. Remember that any official fees you pay to the Myanmar government only add to the coffers of the junta, though.

Trekking and rafting in the area around Umphang is very popular, especially to visit the fabulous Ti Lor Su waterfall, which cascades down a cliff in several plumes, and is at its best around October and November. **Umphang Hill Resort** (✆ **05556-1063;** www.umphanghill.com) provides basic lodging (rooms 500B–2,000B) in the tiny town of Umphang, and organizes a variety of trekking and rafting tours in the region, lasting between a day and a week. Prices work out to around 1,500B per person per day, depending on the size of the group.

12

Exploring Northern Thailand

Northern Thailand is home to the majority of Thailand's more than 700,000 tribal peoples, many of whom emigrated from Laos, southwestern China, Myanmar (Burma), and Tibet, and retain their traditional costumes, religion, art, and way of life. Opportunities to visit these distinctive ethnic enclaves and to enjoy the region's scenic beauty make the rural north one of the country's most popular destinations.

Hill-tribes traditionally practiced slash-and-burn agriculture: burning forests to clear land; planting poppies as a cash crop; and then setting up new bamboo and thatch villages whenever their farmland's soil became depleted. This unsustainable practice has now changed.

Visitors should practice cultural awareness and encourage only positive methods of sustainable tourism (that is, trek with local guides and avoid littering or damaging the natural environment).

Both self-guided trips and scheduled tours—by car or motorbike—are great ways to get around the area. Hill-tribe tours and trekking are also very popular activities and bring visitors into intimate contact with the hospitable minority groups of the north. Many use Chiang Mai as a hub for forays into the surrounding hills. With its cooler climes and pleasant towns, it is a great region for getting adventurous and exploring.

1 THE LAND & ITS PEOPLE

THE REGION IN BRIEF

Northern Thailand is composed of 15 provinces and borders Myanmar (Burma) to the northwest and Laos to the northeast. This verdant, mountainous terrain, which includes Thailand's largest mountain, 2,563m (8,409-ft.) Doi Inthanon, supports nomadic farming, teak plantations on the hillsides, and systematic agriculture in the valleys. The hill-tribes' traditional poppy crops have largely been replaced with rice, coffee, tea, soybeans, corn, and sugar cane. Northeast of Chiang Mai, lowland farmers also cultivate seasonal fruits such as strawberries, longan (*lamyai*), mandarin oranges, mango, and melon. The lush fields and winding rivers make sightseeing—particularly in the cool season—a visual treat. Textiles, mining, handicrafts, and tourism-related industries also contribute to the growing northern economy.

A LOOK AT THE REGION'S PAST

In the late 13th century, King Mengrai united several Tai tribes that had migrated from southern China and built the first capital of the Lanna kingdom in Chiang Rai. Mengrai, whose rule was characterized by strategic alliances, was threatened by Mongol emperor Kublai Khan and his incursion into Myanmar (Burma). He quickly forged ties with the powerful kingdom of Sukhothai in the south. The Lanna king vanquished the vestiges of the Mon Empire in Lamphun and, in 1296, moved his new capital south to what is now Chiang Mai. There is a shrine to King Mengrai, around the corner from Chiang Mai's

Wat Phan Tao, in the geographical heart of the Old City, where, it is said, he was struck by lightning and killed in 1317.

For the next century, Chiang Mai prospered and the Lanna kingdom grew, absorbing most of what now comprises the Northern provinces. In cahoots, Chiang Mai and Sukhothai were able to resist significant attacks from Khmer and Mon neighbors. After the Lanna dynasty absorbed Sukhothai, forces from Ayutthaya tried repeatedly to take Chiang Mai, but the city refused to yield. Instead, Chiang Mai grew in strength and prospered until the mid–16th century, when it eventually fell to the Burmese in 1558.

For the next 2 centuries, the Lanna kingdom was a Burmese vassal—Burmese culture is still in evidence today, especially with regard to clothing and cuisine. After Lampang's

Lord, or "Chao" Kavila, recaptured Chiang Mai from the Burmese in 1775, the city was so weakened that Kavila moved its surviving citizens to nearby Lampang. For 2 decades, Chiang Mai was akin to a ghost town. Though the city was still nominally under the control of local princes, their power continued to decline, and, in 1932, Chiang Mai was formally incorporated into the modern Thai nation.

A PORTRAIT OF THE HILL-TRIBE PEOPLE

The north is a tapestry of the divergent customs and cultures of the many tribes that migrated from China or Tibet to Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Vietnam and ultimately settled in Thailand's Northern provinces such as Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Phayao, and Nan. The six main tribes are the Karen, Akha (also known as the E-Kaw), Lahu (Mussur), Lisu (Lisaw), Hmong (Meo), and Mien (Yao), each with subgroups that are linked by history, lineage, language, costume, social organization, and religion.

Hill-tribes in northern Thailand are subdivided into Sino-Tibetan speakers (Hmong, Mien) and Tibeto-Burman speakers (Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen), though most now speak some Thai.

In addition, tribes are divided geographically into lowland, or valley, dwellers, who grow cyclical crops such as rice or corn, and high-altitude dwellers, who traditionally grew opium poppies. The so-called indigenous tribes, who have occupied the same areas for hundreds of years, are those that tend to inhabit the lower valleys in organized villages of split-log huts. The nomadic groups generally live above 1,000m (3,280 ft.) in easy-to-assemble bamboo and thatch housing, ready to resettle when required.

Highland minorities believe in spirits, and it is the role of the village shaman, or spiritual leader, to understand harbingers and prescribe appeasing rites.

KAREN An estimated 350,000 Karen make up the largest tribal group in Thailand, accounting for more than half of all tribal people in the country. In nearby Myanmar (Burma), it is estimated that there are more than four million people of Karen descent (who are practicing Buddhists and Christians). For years, the Burmese government has been suppressing Karen independence fighters who want an autonomous homeland. Many Burmese Karen have sought refuge in Thailand, ranging from Chiang Rai to as far south as Kanchanaburi. Practicing either Buddhism or an amalgamation of Christianity absorbed from missionaries and ancient animism, Karen can be easily identified by their method of greeting one another: an exaggerated, hearty handshake.

The Karen are among the most assimilated of Thailand's hill-tribes, making it difficult to identify them by any outward appearance. However, the most traditional tribespeople wear silver armbands and don a beaded sash and headband, while unmarried women wear white shift dresses.

HMONG (MEO) The Hmong are a nomadic tribe scattered throughout Southeast Asia and China. About 150,000 Hmong live in Thailand, with the greatest number residing in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nan, Phetchabun, and Phrae provinces; there are approximately four million Hmong living in China. Within Thailand, there are several subgroups; the Hmong Daw (White Hmong) and the Hmong Njua (Blue Hmong) are the main divisions. The Hmong Gua Mba (Armband Hmong) is a subdivision of the Hmong Daw.

Hmong live in the highlands, cultivating corn, rice, and soybeans, which are grown as subsistence crops. Their wealth is displayed in a vast array of silver jewelry. Women are easily recognized by the way they pile their hair into an enormous bun on top of their heads and by their elaborately embroidered, pleated skirts. The Hmong are also excellent animal breeders, and their ponies are especially prized.

Hmong are pantheistic and rely on shamans to perform spiritual rites. Hmong place particular emphasis on the use of doors: doors for entering and exiting the human world, doors to houses, doors to let in good fortune and to block bad spirits, and doors to the afterlife. The Hmong also worship their ancestors—a reverberation of their Chinese past. Because they're skilled entrepreneurs, Hmong are increasingly moving down from the highlands to ply trades in the lowlands.

LAHU (MUSSUR) The Lahu people (pop. 82,000) are composed of two main bands: the Lahu Na (Black Lahu) and the Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu), with a much smaller number of Lahu Hpu (White Lahu), La Ba, and Abele. Most Lahu villages are situated above 1,000m (3,280 ft.), in the mountains around Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Kamphaeng Phet, where "dry soil" rice, corn, and other cash crops are grown.

The lingua franca in the hills is Thai, but many of the other groups can speak a little Lahu. The Lahu are skilled musicians, and their bamboo and gourd flutes feature prominently in their compositions—flutes are often used by young men to woo the woman of their choice.

Originally animists, the Lahu adopted the worship of a deity called G'ui sha (possibly Tibetan in origin), borrowed the practice of merit-making from Buddhism (Indian or Chinese), and ultimately incorporated Christian (British/Burmese) theology into their belief system. G'ui sha is the Supreme Being who created the universe and rules over all spirits. Spirits inhabit animate and inanimate objects, making them capable of benevolence or evil, with the soul functioning as the spiritual force within people. In addition, they practice a kind of Lahu voodoo, as well as following a messianic tradition. The Lahu warmly welcome foreign visitors.

MIEN (YAO) There are now estimated to be 45,000 Mien living in Thailand, concentrated in Chiang Rai, Phayao, Lampang, and Nan provinces. The Mien are still numerous in China, as well as in Vietnam, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos. Like the Hmong, tens of thousands of Mien fled to northern Thailand from Vietnam and Laos after the end of the Vietnam War.

Even more than the Hmong, the Mien (the name is thought to come from the Chinese word for "barbarian") are closely connected to their origins in southern China. They incorporated an ancient version of southern Chinese into their own writing and oral language, and many Mien legends, history books, and religious tracts are recorded in this rarely understood script. The Mien people also assimilated ancestor worship and a form of Taoism into their theology, in addition to celebrating their New Year on the same date as the Chinese, using the same lunar calculations.

Mien farmers practice slash-and-burn agriculture but do not rely on opium poppies, choosing instead to cultivate rice (grown in soil, not paddy fields) and maize. The women produce rather elaborate and elegant embroidery, which adorns their baggy pants, while their black jackets have scarlet, fluffy lapels. Their silver work is intricate and highly prized, even by other tribes, particularly the Hmong. Much of Mien religious art appears to be strongly influenced by Chinese design, particularly Taoist (Daoist) motifs, clearly distinguishing it from other tribes' work.

LISU (LISAW) The Lisu represent less than 5% of all hill-tribe people. They arrived in Chiang Rai province in the 1920s, migrating from nearby Myanmar (Burma), and, in time, some intermarried with the Lahu and ethnic Chinese. The Lisu occupy high ground and, traditionally, grew opium poppies as well as other subsistence crops. Their traditional clothing is vibrant, with brightly colored tunics punctuated by hundreds of silver beads and trinkets. In a region of flamboyant dressers, the Lisu still steal the show.

The Lisu live well-structured lives; everything from birth to courtship to marriage to death is ruled by an orthodox tradition, with much borrowed from the Chinese.

AKHA (E-KAW) Of all the tradition-bound tribes, the Akha, accounting for only 10% of all hill-tribe people living in Thailand, have probably maintained the most profound connection with their past. At great events in one's life, the full name (often more than 50 generations of titles) of an Akha is proclaimed, with each name symbolic of a lineage dating back more than 1,000 years. All aspects of life are governed by the Akha Way: an all-encompassing system of myth, ritual, plant cultivation, courtship and marriage, birth, death, dress, and healing.

The first Akha migrated from Myanmar (Burma) to Thailand in the beginning of the 20th century, originally settling in the highlands above the Kok River in Chiang Rai province. Today, they are increasingly migrating to the lower altitudes within China and Indochina in search of more arable land. They are "shifting" cultivators, depending on subsistence crops planted in rotation and raising domestic animals for their livelihood.

The clothing of the Akha is regarded as one of the most attractive of all the hill-tribes. Simple black jackets with skillful embroidery are the everyday attire for men and women alike. Women often also wear stunning silver headdresses, with different subgroups sporting different designs. Akha shoulder bags—woven with exceptional skill—are adorned with silver coins and all sorts of baubles and beads.

2 WHEN TO GO

THE CLIMATE Northern Thailand has three distinct seasons. The **hot season** (Mar–May) is dry, with temperatures up to 97°F (36°C). At this time of year, there is little difference between the north and other regions. The **rainy season** (June–Oct) is cooler, with the heaviest daily rainfall in September (predictably heavy daily afternoon downpours). While trekking and outdoor activities are still possible, mud and leeches should be taken into consideration. The **cool season** (Nov–Feb) is brisk and invigorating, with daytime temperatures as low as 50°F (10°C) in Chiang Mai town, and 41°F (5°C) in the hills. Bring a sweater and some warm socks, and a jacket if you plan to head for the hills. November to February is the best time for trekking, with December and January drawing a peak of visitors. In October and November, after the rains, the forests are lush, rivers swell, and waterfalls are more splendid than usual.

FESTIVALS Northern Thailand celebrates many festivals—even the nationwide ones—in different ways than the rest of the country. Many Thais travel to participate in these festivals, and advance booking in hotels is a must.

NORTHERN THAILAND CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Many of these annual events are based on the lunar calendar. Contact the **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (**TAT; ✆ 02250-5500;** www.tourismthailand.org) in Bangkok for exact dates.

JANUARY

Umbrella Festival, Bo Sang. Held in a village of umbrella craftspeople and painters, about 9km (5⅔ miles) east of Chiang Mai, the Umbrella Festival features handicraft competitions, an elephant show, and a local parade. Third weekend of January.

FEBRUARY

Flower Festival, Chiang Mai. Celebrates the city's undisputed accolade as the "Rose of the North," with a parade, concerts, flower displays, and competitions. A food fair and a beauty contest take place at Buak Hat Park, on the first weekend in February.

King Mengrai Festival, Chiang Rai. Known for its special hill-tribe cultural displays and a fine handicrafts market. Early February.

Sakura Blooms Flower Fair, Doi Mae Salong. Sakura (Japanese cherry trees) were imported to this hilly village 50 years ago by fleeing members of China's Nationalist, or Kuomintang, party (KMT). Their abundant blossoms bring numerous sightseers. Early to mid-February.

March

Poy Sang Long. A traditional Shan ceremony honoring Buddhist novices—particularly celebrated in the northwestern town of Mae Hong Son, but can also be seen in Chiang Mai. Late March or early April.

April

Songkran (Water) Festival. Thai New Year is celebrated at home and in more formal ceremonies at *wats* (temples). Presents and merit-making acts are offered, and water is "splashed" over Buddha figures, monks, elders, and tourists to encourage the beginning of the rains and to wish good fortune. Those who don't want a good soaking should avoid the streets. The festival is celebrated in all Northern provinces and throughout the country, but Chiang Mai's celebration is notorious for being the longest (up to 10 days) and the rowdiest. The climax comes April 12 to April 14, days that are official holidays.

May

Visakha Bucha. Honors the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Lord Buddha. Celebrated nationwide, it is a particularly dramatic event in Chiang Mai, where residents walk up Mount (Doi) Suthep in homage. On the first full moon day in May.

Harvest Festival, Kho Loi Park, Chiang Rai. This festival honors the harvest of litchis (lychees), a small, fragrant fruit encased in bumpy red skin. There is a parade, a litchi competition and display, a beauty contest to find Miss Chiang Rai Litchi Nut, and lots of great food. Mid-May.

Mango Fair, Chiang Mai. This fair honors mangoes, a favorite local crop. Second weekend in May.

August

Longan *(lamyai)* Fair, Lamphun. Celebrates North Thailand's most dearly loved fruit and one of the country's largest foreign-exchange earners. There is even a Miss Longan competition. First or second weekend of August.

October

Lanna Boat Races. Each October, Nan Province holds 2 days of boat racing, with wildly decorated, long, low-slung crafts zipping down the Nan River. The Lanna Boat Races are run 7 days after the end of the Buddhist Rains' Retreat, which generally marks the beginning of the dry season. In mid- to late October.

November

Loy Krathong. Occurs nationwide on the full moon in the 12th lunar month. Small *krathongs* (banana-leaf floats bearing candles, incense, and garlands) are sent downriver to carry away the previous year's sins. In Chiang Mai, the waterborne offerings are floated on the Ping River. In the city, enormous 1m-tall (3¼-ft.) paper lanterns *(khom loy)* are released in the night sky, and there's a parade of women in traditional costumes. Late October to mid-November.

December

Day of Roses, Chiang Mai. Exhibitions and cultural performances are held in Buak Hat Park. First weekend in December.

3 GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

GETTING THERE

Before the 1920s, when the railway's Northern Line to Chiang Mai was completed, one traveled throughout this area by either boat or elephant. So when your train ride gets boring or the flight is crowded, remember that not so long ago the trip here from Bangkok took 4 to 6 weeks.

BY PLANE Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, and budget carriers One-Two-GO, Nok Air, and Air Asia all fly from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. From Chiang Mai, flights to Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Pai are serviced by SGA Airlines and Nok Air, while Lampang and Nan can be reached from Bangkok by PB Air. See destination chapters for details. There are also connections between Chiang Mai and Singapore (Silk Air), Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia (Air Asia), Luang Prabang in Laos (Lao Airlines), Seoul in South Korea (Korean Airlines), and Taipei in Taiwan (China Airlines).

BY TRAIN Express and rapid trains leave Bangkok daily for Chiang Mai, the northern terminus. Sleeper cars are available on certain trains and are highly recommended for the 13-hour overnight trip (reserve as early as possible). See destination chapters for details.

BY BUS There are dozens of daily and nightly air-conditioned VIP buses to Chiang Mai and other northern cities, as well as cheaper, less comfortable, buses from Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal. Journey time is much shorter than by train (8–10 hr.) but, depending on your driver, it can be a nerve-racking experience. See destination chapters for details.

GETTING AROUND

BY TAXI In late 2004, metered taxis finally arrived in Chiang Mai, but taxi drivers are generally unwilling to use the meter, so rates are rather expensive. Taxis mostly operate from the airport into town, but they are difficult to flag down on the street. If you phone for a pickup (✆ **05327-9291),** they usually quote a fixed (and expensive) rate; get a staff member in your hotel to help negotiate a fare for you.

BY PUBLIC BUS There's frequent, inexpensive bus service between Chiang Mai and other northern cities. You'll also find *songtaews* (shared pickup trucks) fitted with long bench seats (also known locally as *seelor*) along the streets of Chiang Mai as well as all the major roads throughout the north. They have no fixed schedule, stopping points, or price; just flag them down and ask how much they are.

BY CAR Renting your own car offers you freedom and the chance to see some beautiful countryside at your own pace; main roads are well-paved with frequent petrol stations. It must be stressed, however, that upcountry driving regulations do not really exist, and in some seasons—especially during festivals—drunk driving, passing on blind bends, or overtaking in the lane reserved solely for uphill drivers is especially common. Both **Budget Car Rental** and **Avis** have branches in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. While these larger rental companies have better insurance policies, they will cost more. Patronizing local companies in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai will save you money, but cost you dearly if you end up in an accident or hospitalized. If you're driving out to mountain destinations, select the best-maintained car on the lot (older cars are only for in-town driving). Refer to the "Getting Around" sections in chapters 13 and 14 for specific office locations

and rates. Consider hiring a car and driver from a smaller private company for around 1,500B per day, depending on the distance traveled and fuel used.

BY MOTORCYCLE Motorcycle touring in northern Thailand is another option and best considered in the dry season (Nov–May). For up-to-date info on the best routes to follow, check out the **Golden Triangle Rider** website (www.gt-rider.com); you can pick up their map of the Samoeng Loop or Mae Hong Son Loop at many outlets in Chiang Mai (listed on the website). Inexperienced riders should stick to day trips, and all should arm themselves with up-to-date information about the weather. Hot, precipitous roads doused in monsoon showers make for an early (and easy) death. Stay left, expect the unexpected (such as head-on traffic, putrid exhaust fumes from farmers' trucks, and total abandonment of road rules), and keep your speed steady. No one in his or her right mind would dream of riding here without full medical insurance.

4 TOURS & TREKKING IN THE FAR NORTH

The face of rural life has changed in the far north—a partial result of the tourist influx locally, and partly due to the steady development of Thailand's economy. Northern hill-tribe peoples have been exposed to the outside world and are being asked by Thai officials to stop slash-and-burn agricultural techniques and participate in the Thai economy by growing crops other than opium. Their children are educated in Thai and are discouraged from speaking their tribal language. Within the bounds of these influences, minorities struggle to maintain their cultural identities, livelihoods, and centuries-old ways of life.

Many travelers are drawn to the hill-tribe villages in search of a "primitive" culture, unspoiled by modernization—and tour and trekking operators in the region are quick to exploit this. Companies advertise treks as nontourist, authentic, or eco-tours in an effort to set them apart from tacky tourist operations or staged cultural experiences. Do not be misled: There are no villages here that are untouched by foreign curiosity. In the worst cases, as with the camps of "long-neck" (Padaung tribe) from Myanmar, they have become nothing more than human zoos, with fees paid to individuals for photographs and zero long-term sustainability. This shouldn't discourage anyone from joining a trek or tour; just be aware and avoid any bogus claims. It is also advisable to leave any preconceptions of "primitive" people to 19th-century anthropological journals; rather, come to learn how these cultures on the margin of society grapple with complex economic and social pressures to maintain their unique identities. Awareness of the impact of tourists is also important: Practice cultural sensitivity. With this as a mission, visitors can have an experience that is quite authentic and, refreshingly, has little to do with preconceptions and expectations.

TOUR OPTIONS

There are two kinds of hill-tribe operators in northern Thailand: tribal village tours and jungle treks.

Tribal village tours take large and small groups on day trips to visit villages that are close to major cities and towns. If you join one of these groups, you'll travel by van or coach to see up to three villages—each inhabited by a different tribe—and you'll spend about an hour in each one. These villages have had decades of exposure to foreigners and, because roads connect them to Chiang Mai, have many modern conveniences. Some

Tips on Jungle Trekking

You won't have any problems finding a trek—there are many companies, from small storefronts to hotel concierges, that offer treks out of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Pai; what presents some difficulty is finding the right mix of experienced and knowledgeable guides, an intelligent itinerary, a compatible group, and appropriate timing, all at a reasonable price. Be sure to ask for specifics before departure, because once you're out on the trail, there will no longer be any room for debate. Consider the criteria below for any tour.

The Guide If there's one single element of a trek that will make or break the experience, it is the guide. Few guides are native to these jungles—although some have quite a few years of experience and most can speak the relevant phrases of a few hill-tribe languages (though their command of English is perhaps most important). All guides are required to attend a special 1-month course at Chiang Mai University and must be licensed by the Tourism Authority. Hill-tribe guides are familiar with the best trails, are well informed about the area and people, and are usually pretty interesting characters. Try to meet your prospective guide and ask lots of questions before signing on, though this is not always possible.

The Itinerary Several well-known Chiang Mai agencies offer regularly scheduled routes. Some companies can arrange custom tours for a higher fee. Be sure to get specifics about daily schedules. Most treks involve transport to and from the start and endpoint of the trek. How long does it take and what are the conditions? Expect 3 to 6 hours of unhurried walking each day. Gauge your fitness level and adjust to that or adjust the itinerary. When is lunch/dinner each day? What is lunch/dinner? What are the sleeping arrangements? Nearly all trekking itineraries list the various hill-tribe villages visited; try to read as much as you can and decide for yourself which you'd most like to see.

The Group You can end up making lifelong friends on trekking trips and, conversely, spend uncomfortably long days and nights in the company of folks with whom you wouldn't want to share a cab ride, much less days in the jungle. If you're planning a long, arduous trip, try to meet your fellow travelers before committing; you might find that their stamina, assumptions, interests, and/or personalities are not compatible with yours. Most agencies limit the number of people to about 10 per trek. Having at least 4 in the group minimizes personality clashes and adds conviviality.

The Season See "When to Go," earlier in this chapter.

What to Bring Most trekkers come to Thailand on vacation, totally unprepared for a serious trek, but trekkers should pack differently. Most routes require good sneakers or walking shoes. A wool sweater for evenings in the

cool season and some outerwear to sleep in will come in handy (many trekking companies only provide blankets). It's best to wear long trousers because of dense underbrush, leeches, and mosquitoes. A flashlight, supply of tissues or toilet paper, mosquito repellent, and basic first-aid kit with blister remedies are also recommended.

Some groups bring gifts for remote villages. Ask your guide for specifics, because he may know the needs of the villagers in the places you'll be visiting. It sounds heartless, but charitable trusts in the Third World ask that visitors do not give away the likes of pens and sweets, as this reinforces unsustainable habits that result in begging and harassment of foreigners.

Price Most treks cost less than 1 night at a hotel and three restaurant meals, unless they are organized by top resorts or hotels, in which case the sky is the limit. Some negotiation may be in order, especially if you are traveling with a large group of people. Expect to pay between 800B and 2,000B per person per night, depending on the itinerary. Typically, food, transport, and equipment (backpack, water bottle, and so on) are included in the fee. ***Caution:*** Be sure to get specifics about what is included. Once on the trail, there are no negotiations, and many a trekker comes down from the hills tired, angry, and feeling "taken," because of some minor misunderstanding. You get what you pay for, of course, but be sure that you know what you'll get *before* you pay.

Safety Never set out on your own on a trek. Despite the best efforts of local authorities, it is impossible to police the jungle and there are still some occurrences of banditry on village trails. Do not take any valuables with you on your trek. You can make arrangements with your hotel or guesthouse in town, or even the trekking company you go with, to stow things safely.

A Note on Drugs This region (which is close to the famed Golden Triangle and smuggler trails from nearby Myanmar) is still notorious for the availability of drugs, especially opium and methamphetamines. Government crackdowns and programs to move hill-tribe economies to reliance on more sustainable farming of alternative produce have almost eradicated opium production, but there's a slim chance you may be offered a few pipes at exorbitant prices. If the dangers of taking illegal and addictive drugs in a rural village aren't obvious, consider the financial and cultural impact of supporting local drug economies and encouraging poor models of cultural exchange. Don't forget the corruption factor either. Narcotic use is illegal and the Thai government imposes a ruthless, zero-tolerance policy on drug use. Trek guides and tour operators run the risk of being shut down if found promoting drug use on their treks. Drug dealers or addicts are often executed. Foreigners, if they're lucky, merely go to prison for life.

trips include elephant trekking, rides downriver on bamboo rafts, and staged cultural performances of costume parades with music and dance. These short trips are great for a closer view of these cultures without undertaking a 3-day hill trek.

Jungle treks are more rugged trips with small groups of about 4 to 10 people trudging off to get up-close-and-personal with tribal people. Treks last anywhere from 2 days and 1 night to week-long itineraries. Every trek starts with a bumpy road journey before groups head for the hills on foot accompanied by a local guide, and many of these tours also have bamboo rafting and elephant trekking thrown in for variety.

The guides keep a controlled pace and even those who aren't particularly fit won't have a problem keeping up. Most guides have some knowledge of a few tribal languages and will serve as your go-between. Good guides will be familiar with the villages they'll take you to, will teach you etiquette and protocol, and will negotiate the terms of your "invitation" with the local village leaders. Your guides will also feed you "jungle food"—usually simple meals of rice and fish. If you're a vegetarian, discuss this with your guide before setting out. Sometimes villagers will entertain guests with music and dance. All guests are invited to sleep in a separate area of the headman's house, which is usually the largest in the compound, but accommodations are very basic (straw mats and blankets). It is unwise to try to go trekking on your own, and, in fact, it is important to have a guide who can navigate local customs. Look for recommended trekking companies listed in each section in this book.

13

Chiang Mai

From 1296, under King Mengrai, Chiang Mai (meaning *New City*) was the cultural and religious center of the northern Tai. The city was overtaken and occupied by the Burmese in 1558 until *Chao* (Lord) Kavila retook the city in 1775, driving the Burmese forces back to near the present border. Burmese influence on religion, architecture, language, cuisine, and culture, however, remained strong. Local feudal lords (sometimes referred to as princes) carrying the title *chao,* remained in nominal control of the city in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but under continued pressure from King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the Lanna kingdom was brought under the control of the central government in Bangkok. In 1932, the city was formally and fully integrated into the kingdom of Thailand, becoming the administrative center of the north.

These days, Chiang Mai is booming, with an estimated population of 250,000 (in a province of some 1.6 million) and growing; with those numbers come the attendant "big city" problems of suburban sprawl, noxious pollution, rush-hour traffic, and water shortages, as well as serious flooding (June–Aug).

It would be difficult to find a city that reflects more of the country's diverse cultural heritage and modern aspirations than Chiang Mai. Its heart is its Old City, an area surrounded by vestiges of walls and moats originally constructed for defense. It lies in the shadow of an increasingly expanding city, encircled by gargantuan concrete highways, lined by giant hoardings and superstores. Massive modern tour buses crowd Burmese-style *wats* (temples) ablaze with saffron robes and chanting ancient mantras. Increasingly, old shophouses are giving way to multistory shopping malls and boutiques and big-name resorts, while towering condominiums fill the skyline. Vendors dressed in hill-tribe costumes sell souvenirs in the busy market next to fast-food outlets. Narrow streets lined with ornately carved teak houses lie in the shadow of contemporary skyscrapers.

From March to October, the north's climate follows the pattern of the rest of the country—hot and dry followed by hot and wet. Yet, from November to March, it's almost like another country, with cool breezes blowing down from China, bright sunny days, and rarely a cloud in the sky. During these cooler months, Chiang Mai is an excellent base for exploring the north.

1 ORIENTATION

ARRIVING

BY PLANE When planning your trip, keep in mind that Chiang Mai has international links with major cities throughout the region. **Lao Airlines** (✆ **05322-3401;** www.laoairlines.com) connects Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang in Laos four times each week. **Air Mandalay** (✆ **05381-8049;** www.airmandalay.com) has limited flights to Yangon, in Myanmar (Burma). **Silk Air** (✆ **05390-4985;** www.silkair.com), the regional arm of Singapore Airlines, connects Singapore with direct service four times a week.

Domestically, **Thai Airways** (240 Phra Pokklao Rd.; ✆ **05392-0999;** www.thaiair.com) flies from Bangkok to Chiang Mai at least a dozen times daily (trip time 70 min.). There's a direct flight from Chiang Mai to Phuket daily (note the return sector is *not* direct). The daily 35-minute hop is also the fastest way to get out to Mae Hong Son. **Bangkok Airways** has an office at the airport in Chiang Mai (✆ **05328-1519,** or 02270-6699 in Bangkok; www.bangkokair.com) and flies at least twice daily from Bangkok.

For rock-bottom prices, check with budget carriers such as **Air Asia** (✆ **05322-2170;** www.airasia.com); they fly from Bangkok to Chiang Mai for as little as 800B. **Nok Air** (✆ **05392-2183** or 1318; www.nokair.com) offers similar deals (book well in advance via the Internet, or via ticketing agents listed on their sites), while **SGA** (✆ **05328-1440;** www.sga.co.th) works in tandem with Nok Air to provide connections to Chiang Rai and Pai from Chiang Mai.

Chiang Mai International Airport (airport code CNX; ✆ **05327-0222;** about 3km/1¾ miles and a 10-min. ride from the Old City) has several banks for changing money, a post and overseas call office, and an information booth. Taxis from the airport are a flat 150B to town, a bit more for places outside of Chiang Mai proper. Buy a ticket from the taxi booth in the arrival hall, and then proceed to the taxi queue with your ticket.

BY TRAIN Of the six daily trains from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, the 8:30am *sprinter* (trip time 12 hr.; fare 611B for second-class air-conditioned seat) is the quickest, but you sacrifice a whole day to travel and spend the entire trip in a seat. The other trains take between 13 and 15 hours; but for overnight trips, second-class sleeper berths are a good choice (881B lower berth, air-conditioned; 791B upper berth, air-conditioned). Private sleeper cabins are also available, which cost 1,353B.

Purchase tickets at Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Railway Station** (✆ **02621-8701** or 1690) up to 90 days in advance. For local train information in Chiang Mai, call ✆ **05324-5363;** for advance booking, call ✆ **05324-4795.** Reservations cannot be made over the phone, but you can call and check to see if space is available.

BY BUS Buses from Bangkok to Chiang Mai are many and varied: from rattletrap, non-air-conditioned numbers to fully reclining VIP buses. The trip takes about 8 to 10 hours. From **Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal,** close to the Mo Chit BTS (✆ **02936-2841**), six daily 24-seater VIP buses provide the most comfort, with larger seats that recline (fare 806B). There is also frequent service between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, Phitsanulok, and Chiang Rai.

Most buses arrive at the **Arcade Bus Station** (✆ **05324-2664**) on Kaeo Nawarat Road, 3km (1¾ miles) northeast of the Thapae Gate; a few arrive at the Chang Puak station (✆ **05321-1586**), north of the Chang Puak Gate on Chotana Road. Expect to pay 60B to 150B for a tuk-tuk (motorized three-wheeler) into town, and just 30B for a red pickup, *songtaew,* to the town center and your hotel.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **TAT** office is at 105/1 Chiang Mai–Lamphun Rd., 400m (1,312 ft.) south of the Nawarat Bridge, on the east side of the Ping River (✆ **05324-8604**). Keep your eyes open for a few free magazines available in hotels and restaurants—*Guidelines Chiang Mai, Citylife Chiang Mai,* and *Welcome to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai*—which contain maps, features on local culture, and useful information. You can also find any of a number of detailed maps distributed free, chock-full of adverts for local shopping, dining, and events.

CITY LAYOUT

The heart of Chiang Mai is the **Old City,** completely surrounded by a moat (restored in the 19th c.) and remains of the massive wall at the four corners and five gates, laid out in a square. Several of the original gates have been restored and serve as handy reference points, particularly **Thapae Gate** to the east. The most important temples are within the walls of the Old City.

All major streets radiate from the Old City. The main business and shopping area is the 1km (⅔-mile) stretch between the east side of the Old City and the **Ping River.** Here you will find the **Night Bazaar,** many shops, trekking agents, hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants—and some of the most picturesque back streets in the area.

To the west of town and visible from anywhere in the city is the imposing wall of Doi Suthep Mountain (1,685m/5,528 ft.), where, near its crest, you'll find the most regal of all Chiang Mai Buddhist compounds, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, standing stalwart as if to give its blessing to the city below. The road leading to the temple takes you past a big mall, a strip of modern hotels, the zoo, and the university.

The Superhighway circles the outskirts of the city and is connected by traffic-choked arteries emanating from the city center. If you're driving or riding a motorbike in Chiang Mai, the many one-way streets in and around town are confounding. The moat that surrounds the city has concentric circles of traffic: The outer ring runs clockwise, and the inner ring counterclockwise, with U-turn bridges between. The streets in and around the Night Bazaar are all one-way as well. This means that even if you know where you're going, you'll have to pull your share of U-turns.

GETTING AROUND

BY BUS There are five routes in and around the city, each charging a fixed 10B to 15B fare. Services start at 6am, finish close to 10pm, and run approximately every 15 minutes.

BY SONGTAEW *Songtaews* (red pickup trucks) cover all routes. Fitted with two long bench seats, they are also known locally as *seelor* (four-wheels). They follow no specific route and have no fixed stopping points. Hail one going in your general direction and tell the driver your destination. If it fits in with the destinations of other passengers, you'll get a ride to your door for only 15B to 30B. Some drivers will ask for exorbitant fees when they're empty; let these guys just drive on. If you can deal with a bit of uncertainty along the confusing twist of roads, a *songtaew* is a great way to explore the city.

Songtaews can also take you up to the temple on Doi Suthep Mountain for 50B and only 40B for the easier downhill return trip. You can find them waiting outside the university or zoo at the western end of Huay Kaeo Road.

BY TUK TUK The ubiquitous tuk-tuk is the next best option to the *songtaew* for getting around Chiang Mai. Fares are negotiable—and you will have to bargain hard to get a good rate—but expect to pay at least 40B for any ride. When talking price, it is good to write it down on a scrap of paper, so there is no argument when you get there and the driver asks for 200B instead of the 20B you thought you'd agreed on.

BY CAR **Avis** has an office conveniently located at the airport (✆ **05320-1798;** www.avisthailand.com). Avis self-drive rental rates for Chiang Mai are the same as they are elsewhere in Thailand, from 1,400B and up for a compact sedan. **Budget** (✆ **05320-2871;** www.budget.co.th) has an office near the airport and offers comparable rates and services. Both companies offer comprehensive insurance and provide good maps—even a miniguidebook.

There are dozens of **local car-rental companies** with sedans for 1,200B to 1,800B per day, and Suzuki Caribbeans for as low as 800B per day. Most travel agents will arrange a car or minivan and driver for about 2,000B. **North Wheels,** 70/4–8 Chaiyaphum Rd. (✆ **05387-4478;** www.northwheels.com), has a wide range of vehicles and does pickup or drop-off service to the airport or your hotel.

BY MOTORCYCLE Many guesthouses along the Ping River and shops around Chaiyaphum Road (north of Thapae Gate, in the Old City) rent 100cc to 150cc motorcycles for about 200B per day (discounts for longer durations). Larger 250cc Hondas (as well as others) with good suspension are commonly available and are the best choice for any trips upcountry because of their added power and large fuel tanks; they rent for about 700B. Try **Mr. Mechanic** (4 Soi 5, Moon Muang Rd.; ✆ **05321-4708**), one of many mechanic shops near Thapae. Helmets are mandatory—even if locals tend to ignore this law, they may be able to wriggle out of arrest, but as a foreigner, you won't be let off lightly. Expect to leave your passport as security (don't leave any credit cards). Traffic congestion and confusing one-way streets make riding within the city dangerous, so if you are tempted, employ defensive driving techniques and take it slow.

BY BICYCLE Cycling in the city is fun and practical, especially for getting around to the temples within the Old City. Avoid rush hour and take great care on the busy roads outside of the ancient walls. Bikes are available at any of the many guesthouses in or around the old city and go for about 30B to 50B per day.

Fast Facts Chiang Mai

Airport See "Arriving," above.

ATMs For ATMs and money-changers, go to Chang Klan and Charoen Prathet roads, around the Night Bazaar, for the most convenient major bank branches.

Bookstores **Backstreet Books** (✆ **05387-4143**) and **Gecko Books** (✆ **05387-4066**) are neighbors on Chang Moi Kao, a side street north of eastern Thapae Road just before it meets the city wall. Both have a good selection of new and used books, and do exchanges at the usual rate (two for one, depending on the condition).

Car Rentals See "By Car," under "Getting Around," above.

Climate See "When to Go," in chapter 12, "Exploring Northern Thailand."

Consulates There are many representative offices in Chiang Mai. Contacts are as follows: **American Consulate General,** 387 Wichayanon Rd. (✆ **05310-7700**); **Canadian Honorary Consul,** 151 Super Highway Rd. (✆ **05385-0147**); **Australian Honorary Consul,** 165 Sirimungklajarn Rd. (✆ **05349-2480**); and **British Consul,** 198 Bumrungraj Rd. (✆ **05326-3015**).

Dentists & Doctors The American Consulate (see "Consulates," above) will supply you with a list of English-speaking dentists and doctors. There are also several medical clinics, and standards are very high; but for serious illness, you must seek professional and advanced care in Bangkok.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **1155** to reach the Tourist Police in case of emergency.

Holidays See "When to Go," in chapter 3, "Planning Your Trip to Thailand," and the "Northern Thailand Calendar of Events," in chapter 12, "Exploring Northern Thailand."

Hospitals Try the private **McCormick** hospital, on Kaeo Nawarat Road (✆ **05326-2200**), out toward the Arcade Bus Terminal. The Ram and Lanna hospitals are also popular choices for expats. However, if you—or especially your child—fall seriously sick, it is essential that you head immediately to a more reliable and modern hospital in Bangkok, where physicians will offer better and more up-to-date diagnoses.

Internet Most hotels and guesthouses provide Internet access, often free of charge. All around the city, there are numerous small, inexpensive cafes with service sometimes costing only 20B per hour. **Starbucks** offers Wi-Fi access at two convenient locations: on Chaiyaphum Road opposite Tha Pae Gate and at the Suriwong Hotel on Chang Klan. In the Night Bazaar area, try **Click and Drink Internet Café,** opposite the Royal Princess Hotel, at 147 Chang Klan Rd. (✆ **05327-5333**).

Pharmacies There are dozens of pharmacies throughout the city; most are open daily 7am to midnight. Bring along any prescriptions that you need filled.

Police For police assistance, call the **Tourist Police** at ✆ **1155,** or see them at the TAT office.

Post Office The most convenient branch is at 186/1 Chang Klan Rd. (✆ **05327-3657**). The General Post Office is on Charoen Muang (✆ **05324-1070**), near the train station. The Overseas Call Office, open 24 hours, is upstairs from the GPO and offers phone, fax, and telex services. There is a 24-hour branch at the airport (✆ **05327-7382**). **UPS** has an office in the basement of the Night Bazaar (Chang Klan Rd.; ✆ **05382-0222;** daily 7am–10pm), making it easy to send your finds back home.

2 WHERE TO STAY

City accommodations listed below are separated as follows: outside of town; east of town near the Ping River/Night Bazaar area; within the Old City walls; or outside of town, on the road to Doi Suthep (near the university).

OUTSIDE CHIANG MAI

Very Expensive

Four Seasons Chiang Mai ★★★ About 30 minutes north of Chiang Mai in the Mae Sa Valley, the Four Seasons was Chiang Mai's first five-star accommodation and still sets the standard that others must follow in terms of luxuriously equipped rooms, a wide range of facilities and activities, and, perhaps most important, efficient and personalized service. The spacious pavilions, each with its own covered outdoor veranda, are set among rice paddies with gorgeous mountain views, and the cookery school and spa are just a couple of activities available to guests. A shuttle bus runs to the city regularly. The traditional Lanna design of the complex and its rural setting make for a memorable experience.

Mae Rim–Samoeng Old Rd., Mae Rim, Chiang Mai 50180. ✆ **05329-8181.** Fax 05329-8190. www.fourseasons.com/chiangmai. 93 units. From 19,500B pavilion; from 30,000B pool villa; from 75,500B resort residence. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; mountain bikes; golf course nearby; health club; outdoor pool; spa; 2 floodlit tennis courts; Wi-Fi. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi ★★★ Kids About 20 minutes east of central Chiang Mai, on Sankampaeng Road, this superluxe resort is designed like an enclosed Lanna city, complete with a small moat, grand city gate, and delightfully lush gardens and flowering trees. Horse-drawn carts or modern golf carts bring guests to a palatial lobby. The resort comprises immaculate suites and a bevy of rustic, free-standing villas, all sumptuously decorated. Standard perks in the villas include a sauna, piano, sun deck, and Jacuzzi. Around a working rice paddy lie delightful pool villas with outdoor pavilions, and even hill-tribe–style stilt cottages next to a working vegetable patch. All units have large balconies, but the rice barns offer two stories of teak-lined luxury. Colonial suites are nearer the main lobby and have Persian rugs, pretty fretwork, high ceilings, and delightful pastel hues. At times the style of some of the more over-the-top suites may teeter on kitsch, but it somehow seems to work well with the contrasting rustic ambience.

51/4 Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd., Moo 1, Tambon Tasala, Chiang Mai 50000. ✆ **05388-8929.** Fax 05388-8928. www.mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai. 123 units. 17,599B villa; 22,299B colonial suite; 50,000B grand deluxe 2-bedroom villa; 280,000B royal residence. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; bike rentals; health club; kids' club; 2 pools; room service; spa; tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, kitchenette, minibar, Wi-Fi, butler service, whirlpool tub.

NEAR THE PING RIVER

Very Expensive

The Chedi ★★★ On what was once the site of the venerable British Consulate, the Chedi is a luxurious oasis facing some beautiful river scenery along the Ping River, just southeast of the Night Bazaar area. Mixing eclectic styles of architecture by the inimitable Kerry Hill, along with pretty lawns and a central riverside location, the hotel has finally brought luxury downtown. As expected from the General Hotel Management (GHM) group, the Chedi offers nothing but the highest standards, with a rather daunting exterior of minimalist wooden slats giving way to a crisp interior of large reflecting pools and polished concrete paths leading to a gem of a colonial mansion: In sum, it's all a delightful mix of modern and colonial. Rooms are up to crisp business hotel standards, and all offer a private courtyard entrance. Chedi Club Suites are enormous and come with lots of extras. The glassy pool pops right out, and spa treatments are on tap.

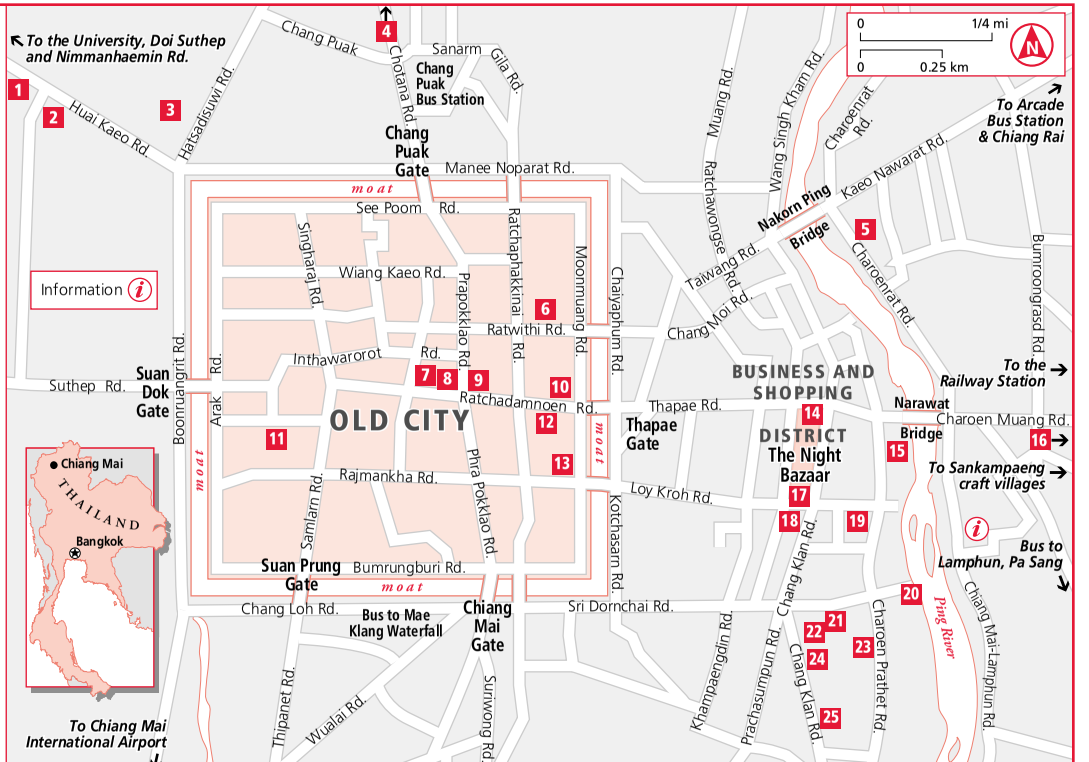
123 Charoen Prathet Rd., Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05325-3333.** Fax 05325-3352. www.ghmhotels.com. 84 units. 13,700B deluxe double; 20,600B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; airport transfers; babysitting; health club; outdoor pool; spa; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fax, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

D2 Hotel ★★ From the lobby to the restaurants to the guest rooms, every corner of this hotel is bathed in a postmodern minimalist cool. Oranges and browns are the dominant colors, and the furniture and decor seamlessly blend sharp lines with rounded edges—everything flows. Rooms are very livable and have all the finer creature comforts: daybeds, flatscreen TVs with DVD players, and well-stocked bathrooms. An upgrade to the club deluxe level allows access to the chic club lounge, with free cocktails and Internet service. Dusit's famous Devarana Spa is the one part of the hotel that the young'uns were not allowed to get their hands on—it retains its traditional Thai elegance. The hotel's staff exudes a laid-back cool, but is very attentive and helpful. Overall, this is an enjoyable and unique choice.

100 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (2 blocks south of Tha Pae Rd., 2 blocks west of river, just north of Night Bazaar). ✆ **05399-9999.** Fax 05399-9900. www.dusit.com. 131 units. 8,000B deluxe; 9,300B club

- The Amari Rincome Hotel **1**
- Baan Kaew Guesthouse **23**
- Baan Orapin **5**
- The Chedi **20**
- Chiang Mai Orchid **2**
- Chiang Mai Plaza **21**
- D2 Hotel **14**
- Downtown Inn **19**
- Empress **25**
- Eurana Boutique Hotel **6**
- Four Seasons Chiang Mai **4**
- Galare Guesthouse **15**
- Gap's House **12**
- Le Meridien **17**
- Mandarin Oriental Dhara Devi **16**
- Montri Hotel **10**
- The Rachamankha **11**
- Royal Princess **18**
- Shangri-La **24**
- Tamarind Village **9**
- Top North Guest House **13**
- U Chiang Mai **8**
- Villa Duang Champa **7**
- Yaang Come Village **22**
- YMCA **3**



 deluxe; 22,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Le Meridien ★★ With an ideal location on Changklan Road, right next to the Night Bazaar, this place is an imposing new presence in central Chiang Mai. With typical Le Meridien flair, the design both outside and inside is very pleasing on the eye, and the spacious and well-lit rooms are packed with state-of-the-art furnishings and fittings, including high-definition TVs and high-speed Internet access. This is a rare example of an area hotel with wheelchair access, too. The muted earth tones of the decor are very restful, and some upper-floor rooms have wonderful views of the nearby mountain, Doi Suthep. The hotel's restaurants and bars offer an appetizing array of culinary delights, exotic cocktails, and fruit infusions.

108 Changklan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05325-3666.** www.starwoodhotels.com. 384 units. 5,000B–8,000B double; 9,000B–11,500B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; fitness facility; pool; sauna; spa. *In room.* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Yaang Come Village ★ Named after the massive 40-year-old yaang tree that provides shade for the reception area, the Yaang Come is a small oasis in developing Chiang Mai. The idea behind the resort is to re-create the feel of a traditional Thai Lue village (the Thai Lue migrated from Yunnan Province to northern Thailand a couple centuries ago). While Jacuzzis and wireless Internet access are not regular features of Thai Lue villages, the resort does have a laid-back charm. The lavishly decorated open-air reception leads to an inner courtyard dominated by a swimming pool and Jacuzzi. Flanking the pool area are the guest rooms, which are housed in brick buildings with Lanna-style roofs. All are well appointed with red-tile floors, balconies, glossy tile bathrooms, and unique wall murals painted by artisans from nearby Nan province. The hotel is tucked away from the bustle of the Night Bazaar, yet is still within striking distance of the action.

90/3 Sri Dornchai Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (btw. Chang Klan and Charoen Prathet roads, just off Sri Dornchai Rd.). ✆ **05323-7222.** Fax 05323-7230. www.yaangcome.com. 42 units. From 7,000B double; 10,000B family room; 16,000B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi, outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, hair dryer, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Moderate

Baan Orapin ★★ Finds For those looking for a more intimate and personal stay in Chiang Mai, Baan Orapin is a real gem. Owned and operated by Khun Opas Chao, who spent over a decade studying and working in the U.S. and U.K., the hotel is set on land that has been in his family for over 100 years. Two-story Lanna-style buildings surround the 90-year-old mansion and attached gardens. While the rooms and suites are rustic in comparison with the larger resorts and hotels, they are stylish and extremely clean, with sturdy teak-wood furniture, mosquito netting for the beds, and handicrafts to add some local flavor. Large bathrooms are outfitted in beautifully polished, locally made green-and-blue tiling. Khun Opas knows a wealth of information about the town and its history; he and his staff will bend over backward to attend to your every need.

150 Charoenraj Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (east side of river, north of Narawat Bridge). ✆ **05324-3677.** Fax 05324-7142. www.baanorapin.com. 15 units. 2,400B superior; from 2,800B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; high-speed Internet; small pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Chiang Mai Plaza Hotel The Plaza's two 12-story towers, completed in 1986, form a bland, modern Western hotel, but guest rooms are large, plush, and offer city and mountain views. The lobby is so spacious that the decorative furniture seems almost lost in acres of brilliantly polished granite, and renovations have given it that extraglitzy

touch. The Plaza is also well located—in town, but just far enough away, toward the Ping River, to be out of the congestion. It's very popular with group tours, but the place is so big, you won't know they're there. The swimming pool is surrounded by Lanna-style pavilions, and their spa area is a catacomb in deep umber tones, dim lights, and Thai decoration, where the gamut of affordable but high-quality health and beauty treatments is on offer.

92 Sri Dornchai Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (btw. Chang Klan and Charoen Prathet roads, near the river). ✆ **05390-3161.** Fax 05327-9457. www.cnxplaza.com. 475 units. 2,500B–3,000B double; from 12,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge; babysitting; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; spa w/sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

The Empress Hotel ★ This 17-story tower, opened in 1990, is south of the main business and tourist area, which makes it especially quiet. The hotel has all the standard amenities, and, even when swarming with tourist groups, doesn't seem overrun. The impressive public spaces are filled with glass, granite, and chrome, with integrated northern Thai touches and flairs. Large rooms with picture windows are done in a tasteful, modern interpretation of Asian decor of rose and peach tones. Bathrooms are small but decked out in marble and offer good complimentary amenities. Ask to be on the mountain side, as there are nice views from upper floors there.

199/42 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (a 15-min. walk south of Night Bazaar, 2 blocks from river). ✆ **05327-0240.** Fax 05327-2467. www.empresshotels.com. 375 units. 3,591B–4,070B double; from 6,548B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; dance club; lounge; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center w/sauna; pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Royal Princess Hotel ★ This northern cousin of Bangkok's Dusit Thani is one of Chiang Mai's longest-running hotels, but it has managed to maintain its standards to compete with newer choices. Guest rooms are done in a mix of cool pastels with matching carpets and subdued lighting. The downtown location means easy access to shopping and nightlife; all guest rooms have a good vantage on the glittering lights of the city. You're right in the heart of it here, so be warned that stepping out of the hotel means that touts and tuk-tuk drivers will be waiting to pounce.

112 Chang Klan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (located just south of the Night Bazaar). ✆ **05325-3900.** Fax 05328-1044. www.dusit.com. 198 units. From 2,708B double; from 5,408B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby lounge and pub; airport transfers; babysitting; small outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Shangri La ★★ Located in a lush garden setting in the heart of the city's business district, the Shangri La is a city resort designed to facilitate both business and leisure for visitors. It is just a few steps away from the Night Bazaar, a 10-minute ride from the city's airport, and within easy reach of all major sights, and combines a broad range of facilities such as the CHI Spa with Shangri La's inimitable service. They offer special packages for honeymooners and golfers, as well as excellent dining and drinking options. Ask for a room with a mountain view.

89/8 Changklan Rd., Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05325-3888.** Fax 05325-3800. www.shangri-la.com. 281 units. From 3,570B double; from 4,633B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; babysitting; kids' corner; putting green; pool; spa; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, high-speed Internet, minibar.

Inexpensive

Baan Kaew Guesthouse ★ This motel-style guesthouse, an enclosed compound in a quiet neighborhood, just a short walk south of the Night Bazaar, has a well-tended garden and a manicured lawn. Rooms are very simple but spotless, with new floor coverings

(guests are asked to remove shoes before entering) and tiled bathrooms with hot-water showers. Breakfast is served in a shaded pavilion. You're close to the market, but the place is quiet.

142 Charoen Prathet Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (south of Loy Kroh Rd., opposite Wat Chaimongkol; enter gate, turn left, and find guesthouse well back from street). ✆ **05327-1606.** Fax 05327-3436. www.baankaew-guesthouse.com. 20 units. 800B double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant (breakfast only). *In room:* A/C.

Downtown Inn ★ A more affordable version of the Empress Hotel (under the same management), diminutive Downtown Inn is a good, simple budget choice close to the action of the Night Bazaar area. Rooms are plain, with hard mattresses, and offer showers only. It has a cozy coffee shop, and a simple breakfast is included. The courtyard swimming pool is tiny, but good for cooling off. Discounts are available sporadically.

172/1–11 Loy-Kroh Rd., Anusarn Night Market, Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05327-0662.** Fax 05327-2406. www.empresshotels.com. 74 units. 2,274B–2,633B double; from 6,584B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Galare Guest House This Thai-style, three-story, brick-and-wood motel has broad covered verandas overlooking a pleasant garden and courtyard. Rooms are small but have air-conditioning and king-size beds. Even with linoleum floors, the rooms are very comfortable. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner on a covered deck overlooking the river. An in-house trekking agency organizes trips to hill-tribe villages, as well as local tours of Chiang Mai; ask about discounts in the off-season.

7 Charoen Prathet Rd., Soi 2, Chiang Mai 50100 (on river south of Thapae Rd.). ✆ **05381-8887.** Fax 05327-9088. www.galare.com. 35 units. 950B–1,150B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; computer w/Internet access. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, no phone.

IN THE OLD CITY

Expensive

The Rachamankha ★★★ Moments This immaculate hotel is by far the best abode within the city walls—it's a great escape from the city gridlock and pollution. Just south of Wat Phra Singh, the unique, boutique property is superbly designed in a courtyard style. Service is professional, and rooms are luxurious, with terra-cotta tile floors, high ceilings, and stylish contemporary built-ins; plenty of stunning Lanna antiques are scattered around the long, cool verandas. Deluxe rooms are just larger versions of superior ones. Bathrooms are bright and large. An indigo pool lies in the peaceful courtyard, and on-site is an excellent and fully stocked library. Hotel dining is in either a gravel courtyard or the long, peaceful antiques-filled hall; upstairs is a spectacular boutique.

6 Rachamankha 9 (on the western edge of the Old City), Phra Singh Rd., Chiang Mai 50200. ✆ **05390-4111.** Fax 05390-4114. www.rachamankha.com. 23 units. $235 superior double; $264 deluxe double; $563 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Tamarind Village ★★ After passing down a long, shaded lane lined with new-growth bamboo, and following meandering walkways among the gobo buildings of this stylish little hideaway in the heart of the Old City, it'll be hard to believe that you're in Chiang Mai (though you can still hear the traffic). Rooms at the Tamarind are marvels of polished concrete burnished to an almost shining glow, complemented by straw mats and chic contemporary Thai furnishings, all making for a pleasing minimalist feel. Bathrooms are spacious, with large double doors connecting with the guest rooms, topped off

with vaulted ceilings. There's an almost Mediterranean feel to the whole complex—with all of the arched, covered terra-cotta walks joining buildings in a village-style layout. Short of the fine pool and a dandy restaurant, amenities are sparse, but the staff members are helpful and the atmosphere is quite unique.

50/1 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Sri Phum, Chiang Mai 50200 (a short walk to the center of the Old City from Thapae Gate). ✆ **05341-8896.** Fax 05341-8900. www.tamarindvillage.com. 45 units. 6,000B double; 8,000B deluxe; from 14,000B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Eurana Boutique Hotel This cozy little courtyard hotel in the heart of the busy backpacker area in the northeast corner of the Old City (just inside the moat) offers a serious degree of luxury. Though the cheapest rooms are on the small size, splurge and you'll enjoy delightful contemporary digs with fun, colorful decor and even a glimpse of the (tiny) gardens. It's also convenient for many services (restaurants, cooking schools, and massage parlors) in the Old City.

7/1 Moon Muang Rd. Soi 7, Chiang Mai 50200. ✆ **05321-4522.** Fax 05322-3042. www.euranaboutique hotel.com. 72 units. 2,100B–3,500B double; 5,000B suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

U Chiang Mai ★ With an ideal location right in the center of the Old City, this new place makes it easy to walk to the city's main temples, and the Sunday Walking Street (p. 337) sets up right in front. Rooms are tastefully equipped in Lanna style, and guests have use of the gym, infinity pool, and spa facilities. Added touches, such as breakfast whenever and wherever you like it in the on-site restaurant and free Wi-Fi, make this an attractive option.

70 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Sri Phum, Chiang Mai 50200. ✆ **05332-7000.** Fax 05332-7096. www.uhotels resorts.com. 41 units. From 4,199B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; gym; outdoor pool; spa. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Villa Duang Champa ★ This cute, refurbished colonial house is full of character and superbly located for sightseeing in the heart of the Old City. There are just 10 rooms in the main building, each with different furnishings and decor, and a restful spa in the wooden villa out back. Some of the well-equipped rooms have small balconies and others have views of the nearby mountain, Doi Suthep. The place lacks amenities, such as a restaurant and bar, but there are plenty of places just a few steps away, and the friendly staff members are happy to give advice.

82 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Sri Phum, Chiang Mai 50200. ✆ **05332-7198-9.** Fax 05332-7197. www.villa duangchampa.com. 10 units. 2,400B–3,200B double. Breakfast included in rates. MC, V. **Amenities:** Breakfast room; spa. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge.

Inexpensive

Gap's House Gap's House is tucked down a quiet lane just inside the city wall near Thapae Gate. Long popular among budget travelers, the hotel boasts a calm atmosphere, with a leafy central garden area surrounding a large, teak Lanna pavilion. Rooms are in free-standing teak houses and feature woven rattan beds and small tiled bathrooms. Time is taking a toll on the room facilities: The rustic charm borders are just plain tatty and management is rather indifferent. It's still a cheap, atmospheric choice in the town center, though, and its cooking classes are particularly popular. No advance bookings are accepted, so call on arrival.

3 Ratchadamnoen Rd. Soi 4, Chiang Mai 50000 (1 block west of Thapae Gate on left). ✆/fax **05327-8140.** www.gaps-house.com. 20 units. 470B–700B double. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Vegetarian restaurant. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi, no phone.

Montri Hotel ★ The earliest address of note for foreigners in Chiang Mai, the Montri is still a convenient, inexpensive location just inside the Old City—and across from Thapae Gate—however, it doesn't offer much in the way of charm. Dark parquet floors are standard throughout, and bathrooms are shower-in-room style. Newly renovated rooms with built-in cabinets try to be attractive, but merely pass as comfortable. Their main advantage is that they are a good value. ***Note:*** Ask for a room at the rear; you'll get more peace and quiet, and from the higher floors you can see the outline of Doi Suthep.

2–6 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Chiang Mai 50100 (just northwest across from Thapae Gate). ✆ **05321-1069.** Fax 05321-7416. www.montrihotel.com. 75 units. 750B–1,000B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Top North Guest House South of Thapae and down one of the Old City's narrow lanes, laid-back Top North is comfortable and affordable. Its small central pool is unique in this category and is a popular hangout for backpackers going upscale. There are many room categories. All have high ceilings, and the top rooms (500B) are large and clean, with tile floors and large bathrooms with bathtubs. Time is not kind to budget hotels, though, and some of the room furnishings here look like they've seen better days—ask to check out rooms before signing on. Rooms on the lower echelon vary in price and amenities (with or without air-conditioning or TV), but all have hot-water showers. Their sister property, **Top North Hotel** (✆ **05327-9623**), is an old standby, just south of the Thapae Gate within the Old City, and offers a slightly higher class of rooms. It seems to attract a rougher lot, though; stay there only if Top North Guest House is booked up.

15 Moon Muang Rd., Soi 2, Chiang Mai 50100. ✆ **05327-8684.** Fax 05327-8485. www.topnorthgroup.com. 90 units. 500B double with A/C; 400B double with fan. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; high-speed Internet center. *In room:* A/C (in some), TV, no phone.

WEST SIDE/UNIVERSITY AREA

Moderate

The Amari Rincome Hotel ★★ Value This tranquil hotel complex is a favorite because of its unpretentious atmosphere and friendly service. The public spaces are lively, and around the gigantic pool, the gardens—which contain a huge aviary—are impressive. The best (and quieter) rooms offer pool views and come with west-facing balconies on which to enjoy a cool breakfast and sunset. There is a certain amount of (daytime) noise from low-flying planes, so light sleepers will do well to use earplugs. Most guest rooms are decorated in pastel hues, and the bathrooms are functional, with small tubs and fixed hair dryers. Dining at their **La Gritta** restaurant is good, and the hotel is located near the best upscale shopping in town. The staff's professionalism is evident from the moment the minibus meets you at the airport. They can help with any eventuality (tours, transport, and so on).

1 Nimmanhaemin Rd., off Huay Kaeo Rd., Chiang Mai 50200 (near Superhighway, northwest of Old City). ✆ **05322-1130.** Fax 05322-1915. www.amari.com/rincome. 158 units. From 2,689B double; from 6,200B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; high-speed Internet; 2 outdoor pools; room service; outdoor lit tennis court. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Chiang Mai Orchid ★ The Orchid has attractive facilities and friendly service, and is next to one of Chiang Mai's most popular hangouts, Gad Suan Kaew Shopping Complex. Spacious, quiet rooms are large, familiar, and pleasantly decorated with local woodcarvings. The lobby and other public spaces are furnished with clusters of chic, low-slung rattan couches and chairs and are decorated with flowers. They cover all the bases in amenities, from dining to car rental—plus there's a knowledgeable tour desk.

23 Huai Kaeo Rd., Chiang Mai 50200 (northwest of Old City, next door to Gad San Kaew/Central Shopping Complex). ✆ **05322-2099.** Fax 05322-1625. www.chiangmaiorchid.com. 267 units. $70–$88 double; from $225 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lounge and pub; babysitting; children's playground; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

Yes, the Village People are here in Chiang Mai: The rooms at **YMCA International Hotel** (11 Sermsuk Rd., Chang Puak; ✆ **05322-1819;** www.ymcachiangmai.org) have attracted missionaries and budget travelers for years. Rooms start at just 600B for a basic double. In the off-season, you may find the Montri Hotel (see above) to be a more economical and better-located option.

3 WHERE TO DINE

Northern-style Thai cooking is influenced by the nearby Burmese, Yunnanese, and Lao cuisines. Many northern Thai dishes are not served with steamed rice, but *khao niaow* (glutinous or sticky rice), which can be cooked as an accompaniment to a savory dish or used in dessert. Sticky rice is sometimes served simply in a knotted banana leaf or in a small cylindrical basket with a lid. Chiang Mai specialties include *sai ua* (Chiang Mai sausage), *khao soi* (a spicy, yellow, Burmese-style curry with pickles and both fried and boiled noodles), and many other slightly sweet meat and fish curries. You may be relieved to know that chili peppers are used less than in other Thai regional cuisines.

The formal northern meal is called *khan toke* and refers to the practice of sharing a variety of main courses, with guests seated around *khan toke* (low, lacquered teak tables); eating is done using the hands. Most of the restaurants that serve *khan toke* combine a dance performance with the meal. The best such places are covered in "Chiang Mai After Dark," later in this chapter.

Chiang Mai is also blessed with good street food and markets. **Anusarn Market** on the corner of Sri Dornchai and Chang Klan roads near the Night Bazaar is a good place for authentic local food, though the seafood tends to be a bit pricey. Also try **Somphet Market** on the northeast corner of the old city; it's a good place to pick up snacks like fried bananas or sticky-rice desserts in the daytime or have a good cheap meal in the evening, at which point the area bustles with locals and young backpackers.

Chiang Mai folks take their *khao soi*—Burmese curry and noodles—pretty seriously; it's a favorite lunchtime dish. The best is to be had in **Faharm,** an area about 1km (⅔ mile) north of central Nawarat Bridge, on Charoenrat Road, along the east bank of the Ping River. A number of open-air places serve the delicacy for just 30B, along with tasty skewers of chicken and pork satay. One of the best is **Khao Soi Samoe Jai;** there's no English sign but it's immediately north of Wat Faharm, and open lunchtimes only. Count on this place always being packed, as it's well known to locals.

NEAR THE PING RIVER

Expensive

Fujian ★★★ CHINESE Set in an elegant 1930s Shanghai mansion, at the entrance to the traditional Lanna village that contains the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi hotel (p. 314), this restaurant turns out some of the tastiest Chinese cuisine to be found in Thailand. Choices range from delicious dim sum lunches to indulgent dinners featuring Cantonese and Sichuan specialties. While eating, diners are invited to taste the black tea from Fujian Province after which the restaurant is named.

5/14 Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd. (4km/2½ miles east on Charoen Muang). ✆ **05388-8888.** www.mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai/dining. Main courses 520B–950B; set dinners 800B–1,500B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.

The House ★★★ PACIFIC RIM/MODERN ASIAN This wonderful supper-only bistro was established by a resident Dane who immediately upped the culinary standards in Chiang Mai. Set in an old 1960s edifice that's been lovingly restored, the main dining room has large windows with gorgeous drapes, silk cushions, and candlelit tables; upstairs there are two rooms that are even cozier. An internationally trained Thai chef works his magic on a constantly evolving menu of regionally influenced classical dishes, a medley of grilled items and imported steaks, and lamb and seafood when available—there are fabulous desserts to boot. For good value, order the four-course set dinner (with a free glass of wine) for 900B. Outside is a Moorish souk-styled lounge bar with lights in the trees, and a separate tapas bar for snacks. This refined dining spot, with its romantic nooks and funky furnishings, caters to the discerning traveler.

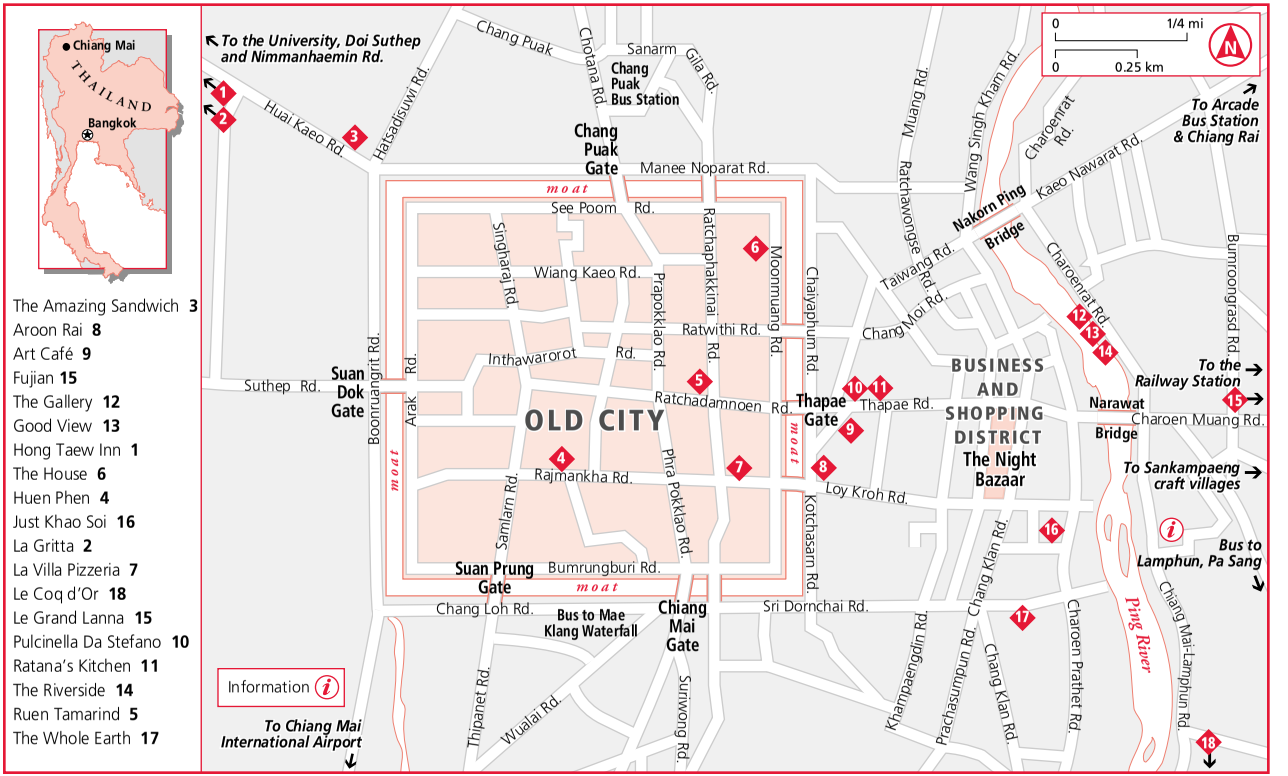
199 Moon Muang Rd. (north of Thapae gate on the inside edge of the city moat). ✆ **05341-9014.** www.thehousethailand.com. Main courses 450B–850B. MC, V. Daily kitchen 6–10:30pm. Bar 6pm–1am.

Le Coq d'Or ★★★ FRENCH In a colonial house setting, Le Coq d'Or has been around for years and is known for its nice atmosphere and good service. The menu offers imported beef, lamb, and local fish prepared in French and Continental styles. Try the chateaubriand, or the poached Norwegian salmon as a lighter choice. For starters, the foie gras is popular, as is the unique salmon tartare served with toast and a sour-cream-and-horseradish sauce. They have a long wine list to complement your meal.

11 Soi 2, Koh Klang Rd. (5-min. drive south of the Holiday Inn, following the river). ✆ **0514-1555.** www.lecoqdorchiangmai.com. Reservations recommended for dinner Sat–Sun. Main courses 550B–1,800B; set dinner around 2,000B. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 5–10pm.

Le Grand Lanna ★★★ Finds THAI Located in the luxury Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, this stylish restaurant is entirely built of old teak and is on raised stilts. A 20- to 30-minute ride east of town, it's a good stop before, or after, a trip to the craft workshops at Sankampaeng. The restaurant provides icy cool air-conditioned rooms inside, or terrace seating outside, with cooling mist-spraying fans and umbrellas. Evening meals are candlelit, with flaming torches and the dulcet tones of traditional music accompanying your choice of food. For starters, try pomelo salad (if needed, ask to reduce the spiciness); then try the *gaeng hang lan mop,* a dry, fiery red curry that will knock your socks off and which is best mollified by a sweet mango chutney. Also don't pass up their signature *sai ua,* or Chiang Mai spicy sausage. Follow up with great homemade ice cream made of local litchi (lychee) or taro (yam). If you're short of time or money, come for a drink, at least.

51/4 Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd. (4km/2½ miles east on Charoen Muang). ✆ **05388-8888.** Main courses 500B–1,200B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 6:30–10:30pm.


Chiang Mai
THAILAND
Bangkok
The Amazing Sandwich 3
Aroon Rai 8
Art Café 9
Fujian 15
The Gallery 12
Good View 13
Hong Taew Inn 1
The House 6
Huen Phen 4
Just Khao Soi 16
La Gritta 2
La Villa Pizzeria 7
Le Coq d'Or 18
Le Grand Lanna 15
Pulcinella Da Stefano 10
Ratana's Kitchen 11
The Riverside 14
Ruen Tamarind 5
The Whole Earth 17
To the University, Doi Suthep and Nimmanhaemin Rd.
Chang Puak
Chotana Rd.
Sanarm
Gila Rd.
Chang Puak Bus Station
Huai Kaeo Rd.
Hatsadisuwi Rd.
Chang Puak Gate
Manee Noparat Rd.
moat
See Poom Rd.
Singharaj Rd.
Ratchaphakkinai Rd.
Moonmuang Rd.
Chaiyaphum Rd.
Wiang Kaeo Rd.
Prapokklao Rd.
Ratwithi Rd.
Inthawarorot Rd.
Suan Dok Gate
Suthep Rd.
Boonruangrit Rd.
Arak Rd.
Ratchadamnoen Rd.
OLD CITY
Thapae Gate
Thapae Rd.
Rajmankha Rd.
Phra Pokklao Rd.
Samlarn Rd.
Loy Kroh Rd.
Kotchasarn Rd.
Suan Prung Gate
Bumrungburi Rd.
Chang Loh Rd.
Bus to Mae Klang Waterfall
Chiang Mai Gate
Sri Dornchai Rd.
Information
To Chiang Mai International Airport
Thipanet Rd.
Wualai Rd.
Sunwong Rd.
Muang Rd.
Ratchawongse Rd.
Wang Singh Kham Rd.
Charoenrat Rd.
Kaeo Nawarat Rd.
Nakorn Ping Bridge
Taiwang Rd.
Chang Moi Rd.
BUSINESS AND SHOPPING DISTRICT
The Night Bazaar
Khampaengdin Rd.
Prachasumpun Rd.
Chang Klan Rd.
Charoen Prathet Rd.
Ping River
Chiang Mai-Lamphun Rd.
Charoenrat Rd.
Bumroongrasd Rd.
Narawat Bridge
Charoen Muang Rd.
0 1/4 mi
0 0.25 km
To Arcade Bus Station & Chiang Rai
To the Railway Station
To Sankampaeng craft villages
Bus to Lamphun, Pa Sang

Moderate

The Whole Earth ★ (Value) VEGETARIAN/INDIAN Featuring Asian foods, mostly Indian and Thai, prepared with light, fresh ingredients in healthy and creative ways, this 30-year-old Chiang Mai institution is a real find. The restaurant is set in a traditional Lanna Thai pavilion and has an indoor air-conditioned nonsmoking section, and a long open-air veranda with views of the gardens. The menu is extensive, and everything on it is good. Try the spicy house vegetarian curry with tofu, wrapped in seaweed, and finish with a fresh mango lassi.

88 Sri Donchai Rd., A. Muang. ✆ **05328-2463.** Main courses 220B–360B. MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Inexpensive

The Gallery ★ THAI Built in 1892 and one of the oldest original wooden structures in Chiang Mai, The Gallery is the most charming of the riverside restaurants on the eastern bank of the Ping River. It has been on the tourist route for so long (even Hillary Clinton came here) that it can sometimes seem like it caters to foreigners only. Pause as you enter to view some of the original art on display. Try the local fish or *hor mok curry.* The proximity to the river is agreeable, but apply plenty of mosquito repellent, as mosquitoes come here to eat too. Candlelight, soft Thai music, and a great view of the river—plus the city's twinkling lights beyond—top off what's sure to be a lovely evening of dining.

25–29 Charoenrat Rd. (east side of river, north of Nawarat Bridge). ✆ **05324-8601.** www.thegallery-restaurant.com. Main courses 150B–380B. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–1am.

Good View ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL This place packs in raucous crowds of young rock-music fans from early evening until late, but once the live band revs up, forget any conversation. Thais tend to come here to eat, drink, and overdrink before they party, so it is always busy and, yes, very noisy. The food is fair and unimaginative, offering the usual tourist menu; it's probably best to stick with the Thai dishes. The picture menu makes it easy and the staff is friendly. Come early, around 6pm, to enjoy a good, quiet meal overlooking the river at sunset, and then—if your eardrums can take it—stick around for the band and party on.

13 Charoenrat Rd. (east side of river, north of Nawarat Bridge). ✆ **05324-1866.** www.goodview.co.th. Main courses 130B–360B. MC, V. Daily 5pm–1:30am.

Just Khao Soi NORTHERN THAI If you'd like to try Chiang Mai's signature dish, *khao soi,* but don't trust those hole-in-the-wall places where they sell it, then head for this place, which elevates the dish to fine-dining status. You might be paying several times the going rate, but it's still reasonably cheap, and you get to choose from different strengths of broth and a wide range of accompanying side dishes and condiments, all served on a giant artist's palette. Add the spotless, smart surroundings and attentive staff, and you have the perfect setting in which to enjoy this memorable dish.

108/2 Charoen Prathet Rd. (1 block east of the Night Bazaar). ✆ **05381-8641.** Main courses 99B–249B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Pulcinella Da Stefano ★★ ITALIAN Da Stefano's is in a narrow lane off Tha Pae Road; it's a lively and popular place with an extensive catalog of northern Italian cuisine, from steaks to excellent pizzas and pastas. Portions are big, the wine list is deep, and there are good daily set menus and specials. The boss is often on hand to advise, if you can't make up your mind; and it's very popular, so reservations are a good idea. Meet lots of young backpackers splashing out after long treks around the northern hills.

2/1–2 Chang Moi Kao Rd. (just to the east of Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05387-4189.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 130B–320B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–10:30pm.

The Riverside ★★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Casual and cool is what Riverside is all about. It is split into two parts: an old wooden building overlooking the river and a smart new place across the road. It is hugely popular among both Thais and foreigners, so make sure you get there before the dinner rush to get your pick of tables. There's live music, from blues to soft rock, great Thai and Western food (including burgers), and a full bar. Even if you just stop by for a beer, it is a jovial place that always has a jolly crowd of travelers, locals, and expatriates. Riverside also operates a dining cruise at 8pm (boards at 7:15pm) for just 90B per person (drinks and dining a la carte). Call ahead.

9–11 Charoenrat Rd. (east side of river, north of Nawarat Bridge). ✆ **05324-3239.** www.theriverside chiangmai.com. Main courses 90B–330B. AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–1am.

AROUND THE OLD CITY

Moderate

Ruen Tamarind ★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL Part of Tamarind Village (see "Where to Stay," earlier in this chapter), Ruen Tamarind offers a fine selection of northern Thai cuisine with a couple of international favorites thrown in for the less adventurous. A must-try is the *tort mun pla,* or fried fish cakes, a common dish with a unique twist: The cakes are marinated with small chunks of banana and are served with peanut sauce. Delicious. In the evenings, the restaurant's candlelit tables spread onto the hotel's lovely pool deck.

At the Tamarind Village, 50/1 Ratchadamnoen Rd., Sriphum (a short walk toward the center of the Old City from Tha Pae Gate). ✆ **05341-8896.** Main courses 180B–480B. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Inexpensive

The Amazing Sandwich CONTINENTAL The recipe is simple here: Create your own "amazing" sandwich for eat-in or take-away. The palette for your masterwork is a list of ingredients, and you simply tick the appropriate boxes to your heart's delight. Even if you are more interested in local food, this is a great place to get a packed lunch for a self-guided day trip. As popular among expat locals as travelers, it also serves all-day breakfasts, burgers, salads, and pies.

20/2 Huay Kaew Rd. (across from Central Kad Suan Kaew). No phone. www.amazingsandwich.com. Main courses 65B–150B. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 8:30am–8pm; Sun 11am–4pm.

Aroon (Rai) Restaurant NORTHERN THAI For authentic northern food, adventurous eaters should try this nondescript garden restaurant. Their *khao soi,* filled with egg noodles and crisp-fried chicken bits and sprinkled with dried fried noodles, is spicy and coconut-sweet at the same time. Chiang Mai sausages are served sliced over steamed rice; puffed-up fried pork rinds are the traditional cholesterol lover's accompaniment. Dishes are all made to order in an open kitchen, so you can point to things that interest you, including the myriad fried insects and frogs, for which this place is famous. You can even get prepackaged spices and recipes for make-it-yourself dishes back home.

45 Kotchasarn Rd. (2 blocks south of Thapae Gate, outside Old City). ✆ **05327-6947.** Main courses 40B–80B. No credit cards. Daily 9am–10pm.

Art Café THAI/INTERNATIONAL This cheery corner cafe has black-and-white tile floors and cozy booths with picture windows overlooking the busy terminus of Thapae Road and the square beside Thapae Gate. That makes it a good spot for people-watching, resting from city touring, or picking up free maps and city guides and meeting other

travelers. The menu is ambitious and offers tasty Thai food as well as familiar fare, from steaks and delicious thin-crust pizzas to Mexican dishes, meatloaf, cake, and coffee.

291 Thapae Rd. (just opposite Thapae Gate). ✆ **05320-6365.** Main courses 90B–350B. MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

Huen Phen ★★ Finds NORTHERN THAI Just south of Wat Chedi Luang, Huen Phen is not only a convenient spot for lunch when temple touring, but also probably the best place in town to sample authentic Northern Thai food. Lunch is served from a simple, open kitchen by the street, though there is an air-conditioned room too. There's fabulous *khao soi* here, Chiang Mai's famed Burmese curry with noodle, and another tasty (but fiery) dish is *khanom jeen nam ngua,* a beef stew in a hearty broth over rice noodles. In the evening, the quaint, antique-strewn house out back provides a classier setting for a feast of Northern Thai cuisine, including *kaeng haeng lay,* a thick pork and ginger curry, and *nam phrik ong,* a delicious ground pork and chili dip served with raw vegetables and pork crackling.

112 Rachamankha Rd. ✆ **05327-7103.** Main courses 30B–120B. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–4:30pm and 5–10pm.

La Villa Pizzeria ITALIAN La Villa is a friendly Italian-run operation. Light snacks, such as imported *prosciutto* and sardines, are a treat, and main courses include *fegato alla veneziana* (beef liver fried with onions and butter) and tasty pastas. The wood-fired thin-crust pizzas, with authentic tomato sauce and vegetable or meat toppings, are light and delicious.

Pensione La Villa, 130 Ratchapakinai Rd. (north of Rachamankha Rd.). ✆ **05327-1914.** Main courses 100B–250B. No credit cards. Daily 11am–11pm.

Ratana's Kitchen ★THAI/INTERNATIONAL This cozy, cafe-style eatery on busy Thapae Road has become extremely popular for its fantastic range of well-prepared Thai dishes, as well as steaks, sandwiches, and yummy shakes, all at rock-bottom prices. There are books and magazines to browse and board games to play. It's a great place to watch festival parades go past, but, for such events, reservations are essential.

320-322 Thapae Rd. (150m/492 ft. east of Thapae Gate). Reservations recommended. ✆ **05387-4173.** Main courses 30B–170B. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–11:30pm.

WESTSIDE/HUAI KAEO ROAD

Hong Tauw Inn Finds THAI Located in a parade of shops opposite the Amari Rincome Hotel at the northern end of Nimmanhaemin Road, this homey restaurant is cluttered with grandfather clocks and antiques. It makes for an unusual but pleasant ambience in which to taste some delicious Thai dishes; the menu also features several Northern specialties, and there's a good range of drinks.

95/17–18 Nantawan Arcade, Nimmanhaemin Rd. ✆ **05322-8333.** Main courses 60B–180B. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

La Gritta ★ ITALIAN Come for their lunch buffets or order from an extensive menu of a la carte entrees ranging from *osso buco* to homemade pasta. La Gritta is in an elegant Thai-style pavilion adjoining the Amari Rincome Hotel located to the west of town. The dining room is done up in rich, carved teak, and the twinkling candlelight conspires to make for a delightful evening. Authentic Italian dishes include fresh pasta cooked to order at a pasta station. A great wine list complements any entree.

Amari Rincome Hotel, 1 Nimmanhaemin Rd. ✆ **05322-1130.** Main courses 280B–550B; Sun lunch buffet 375B 450B. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm and 6–10pm.

SNACKS & CAFES

Kalare Food & Shopping Center, 89/2 Chang Klan Rd., on the corner of Soi 6, opposite the Night Bazaar (✆ **05327-2067;** 6pm–midnight), is where you'll find a small food court next to the nightly Thai culture show, which starts around 8:30pm (buy coupons at a booth and then pick what you want from vendors).

Bake and Bite (6/1 Kotchasarn Rd. Soi 1; ✆ **05328-5185;** Mon–Sat 7am–6pm and Sun 7am–3pm) is on a small side street to the south of Thapae Gate and has tasty baked goods, fine bread, and good coffee.

The Kafe (127–129 Moon Muang Rd.; ✆ **05321-2717;** daily 8am–midnight) is just north of Thapae Gate and it's a good traveler's crossroads where you can pick up handy information, have a great meal of Thai or basic Western food, and throw back a few cold ones.

Mike's Original Burger (✆ **086269-9145,** mobile; daily 8am–3am) serves hot dogs, burgers, and fries in an open-air 1950s American hot dog stand. Just north of Thapae Gate, at the junction of Chaiyapoom and Chang Moi roads, it's a popular stop for post-drinking eats, before the hangover hits.

All along Nimmanhaemin Road, new, trendy eateries and coffee shops are springing up next to little juice bars and ice-cream parlors; take a stroll and pick your place.

4 SEEING THE SIGHTS

THE WATS

Chiang Mai has more than 700 temples, the largest concentration outside of Bangkok, and unique little sites are around every corner. In 1 very full day you can hit the highlights in Old Chiang Mai if you travel by tuk-tuk.

Wat Chedi Luang ★★★ Because this temple is near the Thapae Gate, most visitors begin their sightseeing here, where there are two *wats* of interest. This complex, which briefly housed the Emerald Buddha (now at Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew; p. 124), dates from 1411 when the original *chedi* (stupa) was built by King Saen Muang Ma. The already-massive edifice was expanded to 84m (276 ft.) in height in the mid-1400s, only to be ruined by a severe earthquake in 1545, just 13 years before Chiang Mai fell to the Burmese. Some of the elephants around its base were restored in the 1990s, but the spire was never rebuilt. Buddhas sit in niches facing the cardinal points, and it is not unusual to spot a saffron-robed monk bowing to them as he circles the *chedi.* The huge *chedi* is especially atmospheric during the *puja* festivals, when monks and laymen circumambulate it carrying candles, flowers, and incense.

Wat Phan Tao, in the northeast corner of the same compound, has a beautiful wooden *viharn* (assembly hall) that once served as a royal residence and is adorned with a striking mosaic of a peacock and dog above the main door. After leaving the temple, walk around to the monks' quarters on the side, taking in the traditional teak northern architecture and delightful landscaping.

Prapokklao Rd., south of Ratchadamnoen Rd. Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–8pm.

Wat Chiang Man Thought to be Chiang Mai's oldest *wat,* this was built during the 14th century by King Mengrai, the founder of Chiang Mai, on the spot where he first camped. Like many of the *wats* in Chiang Mai, this complex reflects many architectural styles. Some of the structures are pure Lanna. Others show influences from as far away

as Sri Lanka; notice the typical row of elephant supports around the small stupa behind the *viharn.* Wat Chiang Man is most famous for its two Buddhas: Phra Sae Tang Khamani (a miniature crystal image also known as the **White Emerald Buddha**) and the marble **Phra Sila Buddha.** Unfortunately, the small *viharn* that safeguards these religious sculptures (to the right as you enter) is almost always closed.

Ratchapakinai Rd., south of the Sri Phum Rd. moat. Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–6pm.

Wat Jed Yod ★★ Also called Wat Maha Photharam, Wat Jed Yod ("Temple of the Seven Spires") is one of the city's most elegant sites, though it is located northwest of the center, beside the Superhighway. The *chedi* was built during the reign of King Tilokkarat in the late 15th century (his remains are in one of the other *chedis*), and, in 1477, the World Sangkayana convened here to revise the doctrines of the Buddha.

The unusual design of the main rectangular *chedi* with seven peaks was copied from the Maha Bodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, India, where the Buddha first achieved enlightenment. The temple also has architectural elements reflecting Burmese and early Chinese influences supposed to date back to the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The extraordinary proportions; the angelic, levitating *devata* (Buddhist spirits) figures carved into the base of the *chedi;* and the juxtaposition of the other buildings make Wat Jed Yod a masterpiece.

Superhighway, near the Chiang Mai National Museum (north of the intersection of Nimmanhaemin and Huai Kaeo rds., about 1km/⅔ mile on the left). Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–6pm.

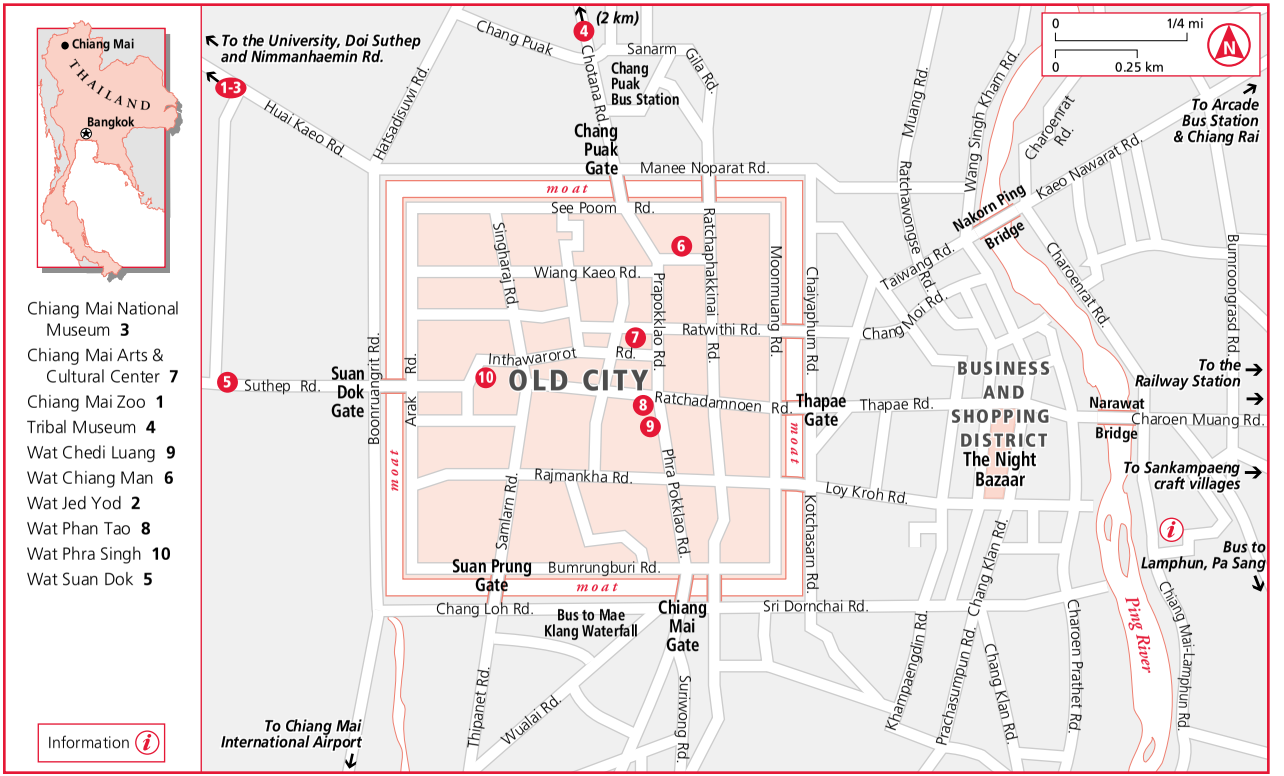
Wat Phra Singh ★★★ This compound was built during the zenith of Chiang Mai's power and is one of the more venerated temples in the city. It is still the focus of many important religious ceremonies, particularly the Songkran Festival. More than 700 monks study here and you will probably find them especially friendly with tourists.

King Phayu, of Mengrai lineage, built the *chedi* in 1345, principally to house the cremated remains of King Kamfu, his father. As you enter the grounds, head to the right toward the 14th-century library. Notice the graceful carving and the characteristic roofline with four separate elevations. The sculptural *devata* figures, in both dancing and meditative poses, are thought to have been made during King Muang Kaeo's reign in the early 16th century. They decorate a stone base designed to keep the fragile *saa* (mulberry bark) manuscripts elevated from flooding and vermin.

On the other side of the temple complex is the 200-year-old **Lai Kham (Gilded Hall) Viharn,** housing the venerated image of the Phra Sihing or **Lion Buddha,** brought to the site by King Muang Ma in 1400. The original Buddha's head was stolen in 1922, but the reproduction in its place doesn't diminish the homage paid to this figure during Songkran. Inside are frescoes illustrating the stories of Sang Thong (the Golden Prince of the Conchshell) and Suwannahong. These images convey a great deal about the religious, civil, and military life of 19th-century Chiang Mai during King Mahotraprathet's reign.

Samlarn and Ratchadamnoen rds. Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–6pm.

Wat Suan Dok This complex is special less for its architecture (the buildings, though monumental, are undistinguished) than for its contemplative spirit and pleasant surroundings. The temple was built amid the pleasure gardens of the 14th-century Lanna Thai monarch, King Ku Na. Like several of Chiang Mai's other *wats,* Wat Suan Dok functions as a study center for monks who have isolated themselves from the distractions of the outside world.


Chiang Mai
THAILAND
Bangkok
Chiang Mai National Museum 3
Chiang Mai Arts & Cultural Center 7
Chiang Mai Zoo 1
Tribal Museum 4
Wat Chedi Luang 9
Wat Chiang Man 6
Wat Jed Yod 2
Wat Phan Tao 8
Wat Phra Singh 10
Wat Suan Dok 5
Information
To the University, Doi Suthep and Nimmanhaemin Rd.
(2 km)
Chang Puak
Sanarm
Gila Rd.
Chotana Rd.
Chang Puak Bus Station
Chang Puak Gate
Huai Kaeo Rd.
Hatsadisuwi Rd.
Manee Noparat Rd.
moat
See Poom Rd.
Singharaj Rd.
Ratchaphakkinai Rd.
Moonmuang Rd.
Chaiyaphum Rd.
Wiang Kaeo Rd.
Prapokklao Rd.
Ratwithi Rd.
Inthawarorot Rd.
Suthep Rd.
Suan Dok Gate
Boonruangrit Rd.
Arak Rd.
OLD CITY
Ratchadamnoen Rd.
Thapae Gate
Thapae Rd.
Phra Pokklao Rd.
Rajmankha Rd.
Samlarn Rd.
Loy Kroh Rd.
Kotchasarn Rd.
Suan Prung Gate
Bumrungburi Rd.
Chang Loh Rd.
Bus to Mae Klang Waterfall
Chiang Mai Gate
Sri Dornchai Rd.
To Chiang Mai International Airport
Thipanet Rd.
Wualai Rd.
Sunwong Rd.
Khampaengdin Rd.
Prachasumpun Rd.
Chang Klan Rd.
Charoen Prathet Rd.
Ping River
Chiang Mai-Lamphun Rd.
Ratchawongse Rd.
Wang Singh Kham Rd.
Muang Rd.
Charoenrat Rd.
Kaeo Nawarat Rd.
Nakorn Ping Bridge
Taiwang Rd.
Chang Moi Rd.
Charoenrat Rd.
Bumroongrasd Rd.
BUSINESS AND SHOPPING DISTRICT
The Night Bazaar
Narawat Bridge
Charoen Muang Rd.
To Arcade Bus Station & Chiang Rai
To the Railway Station
To Sankampaeng craft villages
Bus to Lamphun, Pa Sang
0 1/4 mi
0 0.25 km
N

Among the main attractions in the complex are the *bot,* with a very impressive **Chiang Saen Buddha** (one of the largest bronzes in the north) dating from 1504 and some garish murals. Also of interest is the *chedi,* built to hold a relic of the Buddha, and a royal cemetery with some splendid shrines. An informal "monk chat" is held here each week (see the box, below).

Suthep Rd. (from the Old City, take the Suan Dok Gate and continue 1.6km/1 mile west). Suggested donation 20B. Daily 6am–6pm.

MUSEUMS

Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center In a lovely, colonial building behind the Three Kings Monument in the heart of the Old City, this museum houses a permanent exhibit that walks visitors through a tour of prehistory to the present. Another section houses short-term local exhibits of all types. This is a popular choice (it gets crowded with school trips) for those looking for some historical insights.

Phra Pokklao Rd. ✆ **05321-7793.** Admission 90B for adults, 40B for children. Tues–Sun 8:30am–5pm.

Chiang Mai National Museum While its collection of historical treasures is not nearly as extensive as that of Bangkok's National Museum, this place does provide something of a historical overview—and the highlights—of the region and the city. The Lanna kingdom, Tai people, and hill-tribes are highlighted in simple displays with English explanations.

Just off the Superhighway, northwest of the Old City, near Wat Jed Yod. ✆ **05322-1308.** Admission 100B. Wed–Sun 9am–4pm.

The Chiang Mai Zoo Kids One of Chiang Mai's most popular attractions for locals are the pandas, **Chuang Chuang** and **Lin Hui,** and their cub **Lin Ping,** born in 2009, who are the stars of Chiang Mai's extensive zoo. There's an extra admission fee to see the pandas (100B adults, 50B children), as there is for other new attractions—the **snow dome** (adults 150B, children 100B) and the **aquarium** (adults 450B, children 330B). Open-sided buses and elevated trams are on hand to run visitors around—the site is too large to see everything by walking. All in all, it makes for a good day out with kids who may be wilting from temple overdose.

Monk Chat

What do you say to these tonsured men in orange robes one sees piously padding barefoot around Thailand? The answer is: "Hello. How are you?" Monks, especially seniors, deserve a special level of respect, of course, but are quite human, and the best way to find out is to stop by Mahachulalongkorn University (adjoining Wat Suan Dok—see above—west of town on Suthep Rd.). Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from 5 to 7pm, they welcome foreign visitors for "monk chat," a classroom venue of small, informal discussion groups where visitors and monks come to connect, share culture, and learn about Buddhism from novices, eager to explain and, of course, practice their English. It is a mostly informal discussion about one's own country or sports (young novices are nuts about English Premier League football [soccer]), but the more senior monks can give you some insights into Buddhist practice and monastic life. They also meet for meditation groups and retreats. Call ✆ **05380-8481,** e-mail thaimonkchat@yahoo.com, or visit www.monkchat.net for info.

100 Huai Kaeo Rd. (west of town, on the road to Doi Suthep). ✆ **05335-8116.** Admission 100B adults, 50B children. Daily 8am–5pm.

The Tribal Museum Formerly part of Chiang Mai University's Tribal Research Institute, this small exhibit showcases the cultures and daily lives of the hill-tribe people of Thailand's north. It is recommended as a good introductory course for those who plan to visit many northern villages. Apart from its content, the octagonal building that houses the museum is attractive in itself, set in the middle of a lake in a large park.

In Ratchamankhla Park, on Chotana Rd. ✆ **05321-0872.** Free admission. Mon–Fri 8am–4:30pm.

CULTURAL PURSUITS

Thai Cooking School

If you love Thai food and fancy yourself a chef, consider taking a cooking class in Chiang Mai. The priciest cookery classes are offered at top resorts like the **Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** and **Four Seasons** (covered earlier), but very reasonable courses abound in town as well, such as those offered at **Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School** ★, the oldest establishment of its kind in Chiang Mai. They have 1- to 5-day courses, each teaching basic Thai cooking skills, but daily menus feature up to seven new dishes—over a week you can learn a lot. You'll have hands-on training and a lot of fun. Classes start at 10am, last until 4pm, and cost 990B for the day. Contact them at their main office at 47/2 Moon Muang Rd., opposite the Thapae Gate (✆ **05320-6388;** www.thaicookeryschool.com).

Massage School

The **Thai massage schools** in Bangkok and Phuket teach the southern style of Thai massage, which places pressure on muscles to make them tender and relaxed. Northern-style Thai massage is something closer to yoga, where your muscles are stretched and elongated to enhance flexibility and relaxation. There are a number of schools in Chiang Mai, and many are no more than small storefronts where, for very little, you'll get individual instruction of varying quality. It is best to go with a more established school: **International Training Massage,** or **ITM,** has popular courses (conducted in English) for anyone from first-timers to experts. Each 5-day course is 4,000B. Contact them at 17/6–7 Morakot Rd., Hah Yaek Santitham (✆ **05321-8632;** fax 05322-4197).

Meditation

The **Northern Insight Meditation Center,** at Wat Rampoeng (Kan Klongchonprathan Rd.), is a well-respected center for learning Vipassana meditation. "Are you ready?" is all they'll ask you upon arrival, because the daily schedule means rising early and spending many hours practicing meditation. The monks, nuns, and lay volunteers who run the center invite only men and women who bring a certain resolve—sufficient to see them through the 26-day course. Volumes have been written about the practice of Vipassana, but the main idea is to develop mindfulness and observe one's body, mind, and emotions—to eventually gain "insight" and to see things as they are, without delusion. Come prepared to "peel the onion" of the ego. Participants are assigned very sparse private rooms and are asked to wear white, loose-fitting clothes (available at the temple store), and basic meals are served at 6 and 10:30am only (there isn't an evening meal). Rules are drawn from the monastic precept and, thus, are rigid. There is no charge for the course, but you will be asked to make a contribution to the temple of whatever amount you see fit. Retreats for experienced meditators are ongoing, but they try to consolidate first-timers' start dates for orientation purposes. Call ahead (3 weeks in advance is preferred) at ✆ **05327-8620.** The temple also welcomes day visitors, and it might be a good idea

 for those considering a course to have a look. Located on a rural road south and west of town (past the airport), the temple is best reached by tuk-tuk, *songtaew,* or rented motorbike. For information on Wat Rampoeng, call ✆ **05327-8620** or visit www.watrampoeng.com.

5 CHIANG MAI ACTIVITIES

TOURS, TREKS & OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

There are so many tour groups in Chiang Mai that specialize in trekking that it can seem impossible to choose one. Below are some of the better options—and most reputable operators—for each type of trip. Most of the smaller companies have offices along Tha-pae Road, in guesthouses, and all along the major tourist routes in the city, and they are always happy to talk about what's on offer. Many adventure tours mix mountain biking or motorcycling with tribal village tours. See "Tours & Trekking in the Far North," in chapter 12, for more information on the hill-tribes themselves, descriptions of what to expect on tours, how to select a good operator, and how to prepare for your trip.

For **jungle trekking,** one of the most efficient and reliable organizations is **Contact Travel.** Combining treks and village stays with multisport adventures by jeep, bicycle, and kayak, the folks at Contact can cater a tour to any needs and price range. They also offer more traditional itineraries with elephant treks, visits to caves, and relaxing bamboo-raft river trips, and their English-speaking guides are the best in the area. Treks from Chiang Mai stop at Lisu, Lahu, and Karen villages. A 2-day/1-night trip is 4,600B per person if you join their regular tour, or 5,600B per person for a private group trip. A 3-day/2-night trip, which takes you to a greater variety of villages, is 5,500B per person if you join their regular tour or 6,850B per person for a private group. Their office in Chiang Mai is at 420/3 Chang Klan Rd. (✆ **05320-4664;** fax 05327-9505; www.activethailand.com).

Another company with lots of experience specializing in customized trekking tours (with a focus on bird-watching or rare orchids, for example) is the **Trekking Collective** (✆ **05320-8340;** 3/5 Loy Kroh Soi 1; www.trekkingcollective.com). Expect to pay around 2,000B per person per day, depending on the itinerary.

Boat Trips

Within the city, a **boat trip** along the Mae Ping River is a fun diversion. Head for the boat landing beside Wawee Coffee on the east bank of the Ping River just north of Nawarat Bridge to join a 90-minute tour on a rice barge, starting at 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm, or 5pm (minimum 2 people, 250B per person), operated by **Mae Ping River Cruise Co.** (133 Charoen Prathet Rd.; ✆ **05327-4822;** www.maepingrivercruise.com). They also run private tours, including hotel pickup, which start at **Wat Chaimongkol,** on Charoen Prathet Road (opposite Alliance Française). These tours follow a similar route (heading about 8km/5 miles north of town before heading back). They last about 2 hours and cost 450B per person with fruit and drinks included. You'll get great views of old teak riverside mansions, behind which rises the tall skyline of this developing burg. While on the outskirts of town, you'll see villages that offer scenes of rural living.

History buffs might prefer to cruise the river in a **scorpion-tailed boat** of the kind that used to be poled up and down the river in the late 19th century when first missionaries and later teak traders turned up to try their luck in this remote outpost. The modern

version is propelled by an engine, but visitors can look forward to a running commentary on the historical significance of places passed along the route. Tours are by arrangement and rates depend on numbers of passengers in the group. Call ✆ **053254-5888** or visit www.scorpiontailed.com for more information.

Elephant Encounters ★

One of Thailand's greatest treasures, the domesticated Asian elephant has worked alongside men since the early history of Siam, and these gentle giants are an important symbol of the kingdom. Elephant training culture is strongest in parts of Isan (the northeast) and the far north. In and around Chiang Mai alone, there are a grand total of 14 elephant camps that try to cash in on the popularity of these gentle giants. Not all elephant camps are pleasant: At shoddier camps, creatures are drugged to keep them placid, and conditions are grim. Choose your elephant camp wisely. Resort-run elephant camps, such as those at **Anantara** (p. 368) and **Four Seasons' Tented Camp** (p. 368), occupying adjacent sites north of Chiang Rai in the Golden Triangle, are among the most humane. If you don't want to spend a fortune to interact with the animals, a visit to the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** in Lampang (see the "Lampang" section in "Side Trips from Chiang Mai," later in this chapter) is highly recommended. In and around the immediate Chiang Mai area, though, there are several camps to choose from. Just north of town in the Mae Rim Valley, a number of camps offer shows lasting an hour or so (with rides to follow) that are fun, especially for kids. Some camps offer a few hours of hill trekking on elephant back with two or three passengers to a *howdah* (elephant seat), followed by oxcart rides to so-called "primitive" villages and even bamboo rafting back to camp. **Maetaman Elephant Camp** (535 Rimtai, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai 50180; ✆ **05329-7060;** www.maetamanelephantcamp.com) is one such place. They charge 550B per person, which includes the show, an oxcart ride, bamboo rafting, an elephant ride, and a simple meal.

Mountain Biking

In the fresh air in the hills outside of town, you can get a slower, closer look at nature, sights, and people. Many small trekking companies and travel agents offer day trips, but I recommend the folks at **Contact Travel** (420/3 Chang Klan Rd; ✆ **05320-4664**) for their 1-day excursions just north of town, or for multiday adventures in the region. Day trips start at 2,100B.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Chiang Mai has a few noteworthy venues for adventure and extreme sports. This is the only place in Thailand where commercial **Hot-Air Ballooning** ★★★ has been approved. **Earth Wind and Fire** (158/60 Moo 6, Cheungdoi, Doi Saket; ✆ **05329-2224;** www.balloon.wind-and-fire.com) is a highly reputable and certified outfit with professional pilots operating predawn rides between November and March—depending on the weather. Prices are available on request.

Chiang Mai has succumbed to the **bungee jumping** craze; addicts can head north to the Mae Rim area to try out this sport. First-timers pay 1,500B, but thereafter it's 1,000B. For details, call the **X Center** at ✆ **05329-7700.**

Rock climbers can get their kicks at the north's main climbing area near Sankampaeng, about 35km (22 miles) east of Chiang Mai. Hundreds of routes have been pegged on Crazy Horse buttress, and climbs are organized by **The Peak Adventure** (✆ **05380-0567;** www.thepeakadventure.com) for around 1,100B per day. If you're a beginner and

 you'd like to learn the ropes, so to speak, contact **Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures** (✆ **05329-7102;** www.thailandclimbing.com), which organizes 1- to 3-day introductory courses for 2,495B and 8,495B, respectively.

Ultralight aircraft flights have come to Chiang Mai as well. A small but very organized operation, **Chiang Mai Sky Adventures,** flies from a private airstrip north of the city in Doi Saket. A 15-minute flight, more or less a piggyback ride on the pilot's shoulders, costs just 1,900B and takes you on a great loop out over a large dam and reservoir and past a spectacular hilltop temple. They also do flight instruction and certification. Call Mr. Chaimongkol, at ✆ **05386-8460,** or visit www.skyadventures.info for info.

HITTING THE LINKS

For Thais and Western retirees, golf is a favored hobby in Chiang Mai, especially in the cooler months. All courses below are open to the public and offer equipment rental. Call ahead to reserve a tee time.

- **Chiang Mai Green Valley Country Club,** located in Mae Rim, 20 minutes north of town on Route 107, 183/2 Chotana Rd. (✆ **05329-8249;** fax 05327-9386), is in excellent condition with flat greens and fairways that slope toward the Ping River (greens fees: weekdays 750B, weekends 1,500B; closed Tues for maintenance).
- **Royal Chiang Mai Golf Club,** a 30-minute drive north of town toward Phrao (✆ **05384-9301;** fax 05384-9308; www.royalchiangmai.com), is a fine 18-hole course designed by Peter Thompson (greens fees: weekdays 1,400B, weekends 1,800B).
- **Lanna Golf Club,** on Chotana Road, 2km (1¼ miles) north of the Old City (✆ **05322-1911;** fax 05322-1743), is a challenging, wooded 27 holes, and a local favorite with great views of Doi Suthep Mountain (greens fees: weekdays 1,200B, weekends 1,400B).

SPAS & MASSAGE

The spa industry is big business all over Thailand, and Chiang Mai is no exception. There are a few fine, full-service spas in and around town, and treatments come with a price but are worth it. Many hotels offer massage and beauty treatments, but some new "spa" areas are no more than converted guest rooms with subdued lighting and overpriced services. You can pay a fraction of the cost for the same treatment at one of the many small storefront massage parlors in and around any tourist area of the city. ***Note:*** The offer of an oil massage in a back room often covers for soliciting for sexual services.

Some of the most luxurious spas can be found in luxury resorts near Chiang Mai:

The Dhevi Spa ★★★ at the **Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** (51/4 Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd., 5km/3 miles east of town; ✆ **05388-8888;** www.mandarinoriental.com) is an enormous complex built of teak to mimic a Burmese palace. The treatments and spa environment are extensive, with the unusual addition of a starlit sauna, or *rasoul,* and therapies that reflect local Lanna culture.

Oasis Spa ★ offers a good standard of service at its two locations in town: at 102 Sirimangkalajarn Rd. and 4 Samlan Rd. For reservations, call ✆ **05392-0111** or visit www.chiangmaioasis.com. A luxury campus of private spa villas, Oasis Spa offers a long roster of treatments and provides free pickup and drop-off from hotels in Chiang Mai.

Ban Sabai (219 Moo 9, San Pee Sua; ✆ **05385-4775**) is the bridge between the expensive services of a five-star spa and the affordable streetside places. You get the best of both worlds here: a stylish facility and escape for a few hours at affordable rates. The spa is located in a rural setting 5km (3 miles) northeast of town.

Let's Relax, located in Chiang Mai Pavilion (on the second floor above McDonald's, 145/27 Chang Klan Rd.; ✆ **05381-8498**), and its sister, **Rarin Jinda,** just north of

Nawarat Bridge (14 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-7000**), have affordable massages and are perfect for a quick rest and recharge when wading through the Night Bazaar area.

6 SHOPPING

If you plan to shop in Thailand, save your money for Chiang Mai. Quality craft pieces and handmade, traditional items still sell for very little, and large outlets for fine antiques and high-end goods abound in and around the city. Many shoppers pick up an affordable new piece of luggage to tote their finds home and, if you find that huge standing Buddha or oversized Thai divan you've been searching for, all shops can arrange shipping—or look for the **UPS** office in the basement of the Night Bazaar (Chang Klan Rd.; ✆ **05382-0222;** Mon–Fri 7am–10pm).

WHAT TO BUY

Thailand has a rich tradition of handicrafts, developed over centuries of combining local materials, indigenous technology, and skills from Chinese and Indian merchants. Drawing on such ancient technologies and the abundance of hardwoods, precious metals and stones, raw materials (for fabrics and dyes), and bamboo and clay, modern craftsmen have refined traditional techniques and now cater their wares to the modern market. Below is a breakdown of what you might find.

Tribal weaving and craft work is for sale everywhere in the Lanna capital and you can come away with some unique finds. Check out the highly innovative **Sop Moei Arts,** at 150/10 Charoenrat Rd. (www.sopmoeiarts.com), whose homegrown crafts and ceramics help sustain Pwe Karen hill-tribes, or the well-known **Mae Fah Luang** shops (a branch is at Chiang Mai airport), which is part of a different charity assisting hill-tribe communities and abused women.

Of late, **hill-tribe embroidery crafts** have been modified into more modern items; you'll find anything from chic shoulder bags and backpacks to pleated miniskirts and appliqué shirts. The hill-tribes' **hand-woven textiles** are rich in texture and natural tones, and dyed with natural plants dyes. Cool, ready-made cotton clothing can also be found anywhere for a song.

Some of the city's best **art galleries** and **crafts stores** are all clustered around Charoenrat Road. Pop into **La Luna** (✆ **05330-6678**), for contemporary **Asian art, ceramics,** and **art photography,** while a few minutes' walk away are **Vila Cini** (✆ **05324-6246**) and **Oriental Style** (no phone); both have racks of stunning **silk** collections and tasteful **souvenirs,** with some truly outstanding **hand-loomed silk furnishings.**

Fine **silver** works are synonymous with Chiang Mai, and the silversmiths working around Wua Lai Road occupy Chiang Mai's last remaining artisan's quarter. Early smiths are believed to have emigrated from Myanmar (Burma) with the coming of Kublai Khan, and skills have been passed from generation to generation. While silver is not a local resource, early raw materials were acquired from coins brought by traders. Traditional bowls feature intricate raised (*repoussé*) floral designs—the deeper the imprint, the higher quality the silver (some up to 92.5%). Some hill-tribe groups are known for their fine **silver jewelry**—necklaces, bangles, and earrings—in unusual traditional ethnic designs or more ordinary Western styles. For all hill-tribe handicrafts, the best place to shop is at the Night Bazaar.

Jewelry items are crafted in delicate filigree designs in styles copied by many Western manufacturers. Modern jewelry can be found at boutiques along Nimmanhaemin Road

or at La Luna (see above). There are a number of outlets along Wua Lai Road, and several more on the Sankampaeng Road, to the east of town.

The early royals commissioned carvers to produce wood furnishings for use in palaces, thrones, temple doors and adornments, carriages, pavilions, *howdahs* (seats for riding elephants), and royal barges. The excellent quality of hardwoods in Thailand's forests allowed these items to be adorned with grand and intricate woodcarvings. The skills survived, and talented craftspeople still produce furniture, boxes, and all varieties of gift items imaginable. **Woodcarving** today is perhaps more influenced by foreign preferences, and most pieces are mass-produced.

Lacquer skills came from China with early migrants. Sap is applied in layers to wooden, clay, or bamboo items and can be carved, colored, and sometimes inlayed with mother-of-pearl for a very elegant finished product. Today it is acknowledged as a traditional Chiang Mai craft, having been perfected over centuries by the Tai Khoen people who live in communities outside the city. **Lacquerware** vases, boxes, bangles, and traditional items are lightweight gifts, practical for carrying home. Larger tiered boxes and furnishings can be shipped.

Celadon pottery is elegantly simple in tones of the palest gray-greens. The distinctive color of the glaze comes from a mixture of local clay and wood ash. Chiang Mai has some of the largest and best celadon factories in the country. The best places to purchase celadon are at the beautiful Lanna-style compound of Baan Celadon (www.baanceladon.com), 10km (6¼ miles) out of town, or at the large factory outlets.

Authentic antiques, except for furniture, are virtually extinct in the tourist areas of Chiang Mai. Most furniture is from China. Some shops may offer certificates of authenticity, but as anywhere, the rule is "buyer beware." If you do get your hands on the genuine article, you may have a problem getting it home (see "Customs," in chapter 3).

MARKETS

For many, the **Night Bazaar** is the city's premier attraction, and hours spent wandering amid the cacophony of hawkers, noisy haggling, and all manner of traditional goods and electronic gadgets are part and parcel of the city's charms—but for those who know Bangkok or Phuket's night markets, there will be little variety in goods sold.

Located on Chang Klan Road, between Thapae and Loy Kroh roads, the market starts around 6pm each night and slows down at about 11pm. The actual Night Bazaar is a modern, antiseptic, three-story building, but the indoor and outdoor market extends south to Sri Dornchai Road and far beyond. Many shops and stalls remain open throughout the day and evening too, especially along Chang Klan Road.

The stalls have grandiose names, such as Harrods (with the familiar logo), and most carry poor counterfeit copies of international brand-name clothing, watches, and luggage. Follow this adage: You get what you pay for. If it falls to bits in a week, count yourself lucky. Despite many countries cracking down on them, illegally pirated DVDs—usually of very shoddy quality—are widespread, together with so-called "antiques," such as opium pipes or opium weights. You name it; nothing here will be real—or last much longer than the homeward journey.

Inside the Night Bazaar, there are mass-manufactured Chinese goods such as low-cost fashions and souvenirs. More interesting are the tribal bric-a-brac stalls or items sold by wandering vendors dressed in hill-tribe get-up. The top floor has booths selling locally produced handicrafts, fake antiques, and decorative arts.

The **Anusarn Night Market,** down Charoen Prathet Road, south of Suriwongse Road, carries more hill-tribe goods in authentic traditional styles.

The **Warowot Market,** on Chang Moi and Wichayanon roads, opens every morning at 7am and stays open until 4pm. This central indoor market is the city's largest. Produce, colorful fruits, spices, and food products jam the ground floor. On the second floor, things are calmer, with dozens of vendors selling cheap cotton sportswear, Thai-made shoes, and some hill-tribe handicrafts and garments: It's fun and inexpensive.

The **Sunday Walking Street** takes place along Ratchadamnoen Road (btw. Tha Pae Gate and Wat Phra Singh, in the Old City), which is closed to traffic every Sunday evening between around 5pm and midnight, rain or shine. It's a great place to mingle with locals and other tourists (as long as you don't mind crowds—it can get packed sometimes) as well as pick up a few cheap but unique gifts.

CITY CENTER & OLD TOWN

Small shops and boutiques line the areas around the market and Old Town, luring visitors from the many nearby hotels, but many local designer boutiques have moved out to Nimmanhaemin Road (see "West Side of the Old City," below). **Ginger** ★★ (199 Moon Muang Rd. Soi 7; ✆ **05341-9014**) is a Thai-Danish affair selling gorgeous contemporary day wear (large European sizes are sadly limited), fun accessories, and fabulous twinkly costume jewelry. **Nova Collection** (201 Thapae Rd.; ✆ **05327-3058;** www.nova-collection.com) carries a unique line of decorative jewelry in contemporary styles with Asian influences. They make custom pieces and even offer courses in metalwork and jewelry making. **Princess Jewelry** (147/8 Chang Klan Rd., near the Night Bazaar; ✆ **05327-3648**) offers customized and ready-made jewelry, and good personalized service. **Mengrai Kilns** ★ (79/2 Arak Rd., Soi Samlarn 6; ✆ **05327-2063;** www.mengraikilns.com) is in the southwest corner of the old city and specializes in fine celadon and decorative items. There are lots of silk dealers and tailors in and around town of varying quality. Try **City Silk** (336 Thapae Rd., 1 block east of the gate; ✆ **05323-4388**) among the many for its good selection and affordable tailoring.

WEST SIDE OF THE OLD CITY

On the lanes off **Nimmanhaemin Road** ★★, around the Amari Rincome Hotel, are boutiques selling crafts and designer wear. These make for good one-stop shopping, if your time is short. Soi 1, next to the hotel, is especially good for textiles, homewares, and candles. Look for **Gong Dee Gallery** (✆ **05322-5032**), which has an extensive collection of gifts and original artwork. **Wit's Collection** ★ (✆ **05321-7544**) is a truly sublime, all-white boutique featuring a treasure-trove of fantastic contemporary furniture, ceramics, and homewares. Opposite the Amari Rincome, at 6/23–24 Nimmanhaemin Rd., **Gerard Collection** ★ (✆ **05322-0604**) features beautifully made bamboo furniture.

WULAI ROAD

Chiang Mai's silver industry is just south of Chiang Mai Gate. **Siam Silverware** (5 Wua Lai Rd., Soi 3; ✆ **05320-0003**) tops the list of many offering fine crafted jewelry and silver work.

SANKAMPAENG ROAD

Shopaholics will be thrilled by the many outlets along the Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Road (Rte. 1006, aka the Handicraft Hwy.), particularly since you can wander around the workshops and watch the craftsmen at work. There are several shops, showrooms, and factories extending along a 9km (5⅔-mile) strip here. Talk to any concierge or travel agent about a full- or half-day shopping tour. ***Important:*** Do not arrange a day of shopping

 with a tuk-tuk or taxi driver, as they will collect a commission and drive up the price of your purchases.

The many shops along Sankampaeng feature anything from lacquerware to ready-made clothes, and from silver to celadon pottery. Among the many, try **Laitong Lacquerware** (140/1–2 Moo 3, Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd.; ✆ **05333-8237**), which carries a host of fine lacquer gifts (among other items). Some of the smaller items, such as jewelry boxes, can be quite lightweight, so you won't have to lug tons home with you. *Saa* (mulberry bark) paper cards with pressed flowers, stationery, notebooks, and gifts are not only top quality, but perfect for light travelers. There are plenty of outlets along the Handicraft Highway, with a particular concentration in Bor Sang.

To view a large selection of olive-green celadon, for which North Thailand is renowned, in traditional Thai as well as modern designs, head for **Baan Celadon,** which has a lovely rustic compound at 7 Moo 3, Chiang Mai–Sankampaeng Rd. (✆ **05333-8288**). Smooth and lustrous vases, jars, bowls, and decorative objects spring to life, and even the salt and pepper shakers catch the eye.

Jolie Femme Thai Silk, 8/3 Sankampaeng Rd. (✆ **05311-6777**), weaves traditional silks in rich colors and they style much of their stock into modern ready-to-wear creations. But for truly exquisite woven silk, head to **Vila Cini's** ★★ branch at Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi (on Sankampaeng Rd.); a bigger selection is available at the Charoenraj Road shop. Though focusing less on fashions and more on silk furnishings, this homegrown silk merchant outdoes even Jim Thompson's (p. 128) for creativity and sumptuously stylish designs, all following traditional Lanna hues and inspiration.

NEARBY VILLAGES

Many of the handicrafts you'll find in town—and out at Sankampaeng Road—are the fine work of local villagers around Chiang Mai. They welcome visitors to their villages to see their traditional craft techniques that have been handed down through generations. Purchase these items directly from the source, and you might save.

East of Chiang Mai, **Sri-pun-krua** (near the railway station) specializes in bamboo products and lacquerware. Near Sankampaeng Road, the village of **Tohn Pao** (about 8km/5 miles outside the city) produces *saa* paper products; **Bor Sang** (10km/6 miles outside the city) is a nationally renowned center for painted paper umbrellas and fans; and **Baan Tohn Pheung** (13km/8 miles outside the city) makes fine woodcarvings, in addition to umbrellas. Just to the south, **Pa-bong** (about 6km/3¾ miles down Superhighway 11) manufactures furnishings and household items from bamboo.

South of the city, **Muang Goong** (along Hwy. 108) is a center for clay pottery; **Roi-Jaan** (about 8km/5 miles along the same highway) weaves cottons, dying them in natural colors extracted from natural products; while **Tawai** (14km/8⅔ miles south) employs families that craft carved wood antique reproductions.

7 CHIANG MAI AFTER DARK

Pick up a copy of any free magazine—such as *Welcome to Chiang Mai & Chiang Rai, Guidelines,* or *Citylife*—at your hotel or in restaurants, for listings of special events in town during your stay. Most folks will spend at least 1 evening at the Night Bazaar (see above). For an impromptu bar scene, you can duck into one of the back alleys behind the Night Bazaar mall that are lined with tiny bars—there local singer-guitarists play modern tunes.

If you get tired and hungry during barhopping at the Night Bazaar, you'll want to stop at **Kalare Food & Shopping Center,** 89/2 Chang Klan Rd., on the corner of Soi 6, behind the bazaar (✆ **05327-2067**). Free nightly traditional Thai folk dance and musical performances, beginning around 8:30pm, grace an informal beer garden, where shoppers can stop for a drink or pick up inexpensive Chinese, Thai, and Indian food from the stalls there.

For a more studied **cultural performance,** the **Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center,** 185/3 Wua Lai Rd. (✆ **05320-2993**), stages a good show 8 to 9:30pm every night for 370B, which includes dinner. Live music accompanies female dancers who perform traditional dances while dressed in lavish costumes. In between sets, men dance with knives and swords. A dinner is served on a *khan toke* (low table on the floor), and despite the crowds, the wait staff is attentive. Yes, it is touristy—busloads find their way here—but it is a good time. Call ahead and they'll plan transportation from your hotel.

Most **discos and lounges,** located in major hotels, feature live music, whether it is a quiet piano bar or a rock pub featuring a band. **Good View** (13 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-1866**) and **The Riverside** (9/11 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **05324-3239**) are both popular restaurants along the Ping River (see "Dining," earlier in this chapter) and feature live music after 7pm and on into the evening. On the other side of town, **Chai's Blues Bar** (63/19 Soi Wat Umong, Suthep Rd.; ✆ **05332-8296**) is worth tracking down both for its gutsy music and for its funky decor. Jazz fans should head to the **North Gate Jazz Co-op** (Sri Phum Rd.; no phone), just a few steps east of Chang Puak Gate inside the north moat of the Old City, to listen to local talent or to join in the Tuesday jam sessions. The bars on and around Loy Kroh Road constitute the town's red-light district, with many hostess bars doubling up as brothels or pickup joints.

The **Bubble Disco,** in Pornping Tower (46 Charoen Prathet Rd.; ✆ **05327-0099**), is a dodgy nightspot that attracts a fair supply of hookers and gets shut down from time to time. **Spicy** (no phone), opposite Somphet Market on Chaiyaphum Road, is the place everyone heads to when everywhere else is closed, as it often stays open till dawn.

8 SIDE TRIPS FROM CHIANG MAI

Day trips tend to promote Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai's famed mountain and temple; however, don't miss the charming allure of nearby Lampang or Lamphun, both sleepy rural towns with old teak homes and some very lovely Lanna temples—you can pop into the Elephant Training Camp in Lampang en route.

WAT PHRA THAT DOI SUTHEP ★

The jewel of Chiang Mai, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep glistens in the sun on the slopes of the mountain, known as Doi Suthep. One of four royal *wats* in the north, at 1,300m (4,265 ft.), it occupies an extraordinary site with a cool refreshing climate, expansive views over the city, and the mountain's idyllic forests, waterfalls, and flowers.

In the 14th century, during the installation of a relic of the Buddha in Wat Suan Dok (in the Old City), the holy object split in two, with one part equaling the original size. A new *wat* was needed to honor the miracle. King Ku Na placed the new relic on a sacred white elephant and let it wander freely through the hills. The elephant climbed to the top of Doi Suthep, trumpeted three times, made three counterclockwise circles, and knelt down, choosing the site for Wat Phra That Doi Suthep.

The original *chedi* was built to a height of 8m (26 ft.). Subsequent kings contributed to it, first by doubling the size and then by adding layers of gold and other ornamentation to the exterior; it now measures 16m (52 ft.) tall. The gilded-copper decorative umbrellas around the central *chedi* and the murals showing scenes from the Buddha's life are especially attractive.

Other structures were raised to bring greater honor to the Buddha and various patrons. The most remarkable is the steep 290-step *naga* (sacred riverine snake) staircase, added in 1557, leading up to the *wat*—one of the most dramatic approaches to a temple in all of Thailand. To shorten the 5-hour climb from the base of the mountain, the winding road was constructed in 1935 by thousands of volunteers under the direction of a local monk.

Visitors with exposed legs are offered a sarong at the entrance. Most Thai visitors come to make an offering—usually flowers, candles, incense, and small squares of gold leaf that are applied to a favored Buddha or to the exterior of a *chedi*—and to be blessed. Believers kneel down and touch their foreheads to the ground three times in worship. Some shake prayer sticks to learn their fortune.

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep (admission 30B) is open daily 7am to 5pm; come early or late to avoid the crowds. To get here, take a *songtaew* from in front of the zoo, at the western end of Huai Kaeo Road. The fare is 50B going up and 40B for the descent. The ride can get cool, so bring a sweater or jacket. The bus stops at the base of the *naga* staircase. If you'd rather not climb the 306 steps, a special part of the experience, there's a funicular railway to the top for 50B. You can simplify matters by booking a half-day trip though any tour agency for around 600B, including a stop at Phuping Palace.

Phuping Palace is the summer residence of Thailand's royal family, which is 4km (2½ miles) beyond Doi Suthep, 22km (14 miles) west of the Old City off Route 1004. When the royal family isn't present, visitors are allowed to enter and stroll through its beautiful gardens. When it is open (check with the TAT), the hours are Friday to Sunday 8:30am to 4:30pm, and admission is free. You really have to dress conservatively for this one; military guards at the gate act like the fashion police. The Doi Suthep minibus continues to the Phuping Palace from Wat Phra That Doi Suthep (see above).

LAMPHUN ★★

The oldest continuously inhabited city in Thailand, just 26km (16 miles) south of Chiang Mai, Lamphun was founded in A.D. 663 by the Mon Queen Chamadevi as the capital of Nakhon Hariphunchai. Throughout its long history, the Hariphunchai Kingdom, an offspring of the Mon Empire, was fought over and often conquered; yet it remained one of the powers of the north until King Mengrai established his capital in neighboring Chiang Mai.

The best way to get there is by car, taking the old highway, Route 106, south to town. Superhighway 11 runs parallel and east of it, but you'll miss the tall *yang* (rubber) trees, which shade the old highway until Sarapi, and the bushy yellow-flowered *khilik* (cassia) trees. Buses to Lamphun and Pasang leave from the **Chang Puak Bus Station** (✆ **05321-1586**), while *songtaews* leave regularly from just south of the TAT office on the Chiang Mai–Lamphun Road.

The town is legendary for its beautiful women. There are some historical *wats,* including excellent Dvaravati-style *chedis,* and a fine museum. Longan *(lamyai),* a native fruit that resembles clusters of fuzzy brown grapes—which peel easily to yield luscious, crisp white flesh—are popular here. The trees can be recognized by their narrow, crooked trunks and large, droopy oval leaves. On the second weekend in August, Lamphun goes

wild with its **Longan Festival,** with a parade of floats decorated only in longans and a beauty contest to select that year's Miss Longan. Lamphun and Pasang (to the south) are also popular with shoppers for their excellent cotton and silk weaving.

The highlight of Lamphun is **Wat Phra That Hariphunchai** ★★, one of the most striking temples in all of Thailand. (Wat Phra That Doi Suthep was modeled after it.) The central *chedi,* in Chiang Saen style and said to house a hair of the Buddha, is more than 45m (148 ft.) high and dates from the 9th century, when it was built over a royal structure. The nine-tiered umbrella at the top contains 6,498.75 grams of gold, and the *chedi's* exterior is of bronze. Also of interest in the temple complex are an immense bronze gong (reputedly the largest in the world), and several *viharn* (rebuilt in the 19th and 20th c.) containing Buddha images. According to legend, the Buddha visited a hill about 16km (10 miles) southeast of town, where he left his footprint; the site is marked by Wat Phra Phuttabat Tak Pha. During the full-moon day in May, there's a ritual bathing ceremony for the Phra That.

The **Hariphunchai National Museum,** Amphur Muang (✆ **05351-1186**), is across the street from Wat Phra That Hariphunchai's back entrance. It is worth a visit to see the many bronze and stucco religious works from the *wat.* The museum also contains a fine collection of Dvaravati- and Lanna-style votive and architectural objects. It's open Wednesday to Sunday from 9am to 4pm; admission is 100B.

Wat Chamadevi (Wat Kukut) ★ is probably one of the most unique temple complexes in the country, located less than 1km (⅔ mile) northwest of the city center. The highlights here are the superb examples of late Dvaravati-style (pyramid) *chedis,* known as Suwan Chang Kot and Ratana, built in the 8th and 10th centuries, respectively, and thought to be modeled on those in Sri Lanka's ancient capital Polonnaruwa. The larger one is remarkable for the 60 standing Buddhas that adorn its niches. The original temple was built by Khmer artisans for King Mahantayot around A.D. 755. The relics of his mother, Queen Chamadevi, are housed inside, but the gold-covered pagoda was stolen, earning this site its nickname Kukut (topless).

LAMPANG ★

The sprawling town of Lampang (originally called Khelang Nakhon) was once famous for its exclusive reliance on the horse and carriage for transportation, even after the "horseless carriage" came into fashion. These often florally adorned buggies can still be rented near the center of town next to the City Hall or arranged through any hotel for about 300B per hour; it's an enchanting mode of transport and a pleasant (and more eco-friendly) way to see some of the city's sights.

Lampang is graced with some of the finest Burmese temples in Thailand and supports the celebrated Thai Elephant Conservation Center (see below). Because of the region's fine kilns, there are dozens of ceramics factories producing new and reproduction "antique" pottery. For visitor information, contact the **Lampang Tourist Office,** Thakhrao Noi Road, near the central clock tower (✆ **05423-7229**). The easiest way to reach Lampang from Chiang Mai is by car, taking Route no. 11 southeast for about 100km (62 miles). Buses to Lampang leave throughout the day from **Chiang Mai's Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**). The 2½-hour trip costs about 60B.

For an overnight sojourn, the stylish **Wienglakor Hotel** (138/25 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05422-4470;** www.wienglakor.com) is the best choice in town. Rooms start at 1,400B and are comfortable and clean with all the right amenities. **Tipchang Hotel** (54/22 Thakhrao Noi Rd.; ✆ **05422-6501;** fax 05422-5362) is a second-rate option.

Lampang's *wats* are best toured by car or horse and carriage, as they are scattered around. **Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao** is 1km (⅔ miles) to the northeast of the town center on the other side of the Wang River. For 32 years, this highly revered 18th-century Burmese temple housed the Emerald Buddha that's now in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew. Legend has it that one day the prince of Chiang Mai decided to move the Emerald Buddha from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai. His attendants traveled there with a royal elephant to transport the sacred icon. But when the elephant got to this spot, it refused to go on to Chiang Mai with its burden, and so a *wat* was built here to house the image. There's an impressive carved wooden chapel and Buddha: a 49m-high (161-ft.) pagoda houses a strand of the Buddha's hair. Poke around in the dusty **Laan Thai Museum** toward the back of the compound; it contains some fine woodwork and an old *sarn phra phum* (Spirit House).

Wat Phra That Lampang Luang ★ is in Koh Kha, 18km (11 miles) southwest of the center of Lampang. This impressive temple complex is considered one of the finest examples of northern Thai architecture. If you mount the main steps, you'll see a site map, a distinguished *viharn* (inspired by Wat Phra That Hariphunchai in Lamphun), and, behind it to the west, a *chedi* with a fine seated Buddha. Go back to the parking area and pass the huge Bodhi tree—whose stems are supported by dozens of bamboo poles and ribbons—and you'll see signs for the Emerald Buddha House. The small Phra Kaew Don Tao image wears a gold necklace and stands on a gold base; it's locked behind two separate sets of gates and is difficult to see.

The **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** ★★★ (on the Lampang Hwy.; ✆ **05424-7875;** www.thailandelephant.org) is 37km (23 miles) west of Lampang. They have elephant shows at 10am, 11am, and 1:30pm, and the cost is 80B per person. The center is open to visitors from 8:30am to 3:30pm and elephant rides cost 800B per hour. This place has nothing like the pony-ride atmosphere of most elephant camps; instead, the focus is on the animals, and the country's only elephant hospital is on-site, caring for abused and injured elephants. They also offer mahout training courses, but these need to be booked in advance through the website. This was the first elephant camp to include a musical performance in its elephant show, and its accomplished Elephant Orchestra is still much more impressive than any of its imitators.

DOI INTHANON NATIONAL PARK ★★

The turnoff for Thailand's tallest mountain, **Doi Inthanon**—2,565m (8,415 ft.)—is 55km (34 miles) southwest of Chiang Mai along H108. It crowns a 482-sq.-km (186-sq.-mile) national park filled with impressive waterfalls and wild orchids. A good, sealed road climbs 48km (30 miles) to the summit. At the base of the climb is the 30m-high (98-ft.) **Mae Klang Falls,** a popular picnic spot with food stands. The road to the top of the mountain features fine views and three more falls, **Wachirathan, Sirithan,** and **Siriphum,** all worth exploring. At the end of the park road, you are at the highest point in Thailand. There is a small visitor's center and a short trail into a thick wooded area of mossy overhanging trees called the **Ang Khang Nature Trail,** which makes for a short but picturesque walk.

Admission to **Doi Inthanon National Park** is 200B (children 100B). It's open daily from sunrise to sunset. Tents and bungalows are available for rent—contact the Department of National Parks at ✆ **02562-0760** or visit www.dnp.go.th.

The area is a popular day trip destination for residents of Chiang Mai, particularly in the cool season when occasionally frost (an alien concept in the tropics) can be seen near the summit. Day trips organized by Chiang Mai tour companies will cost around

1,100B, including lunch and a few other stops for sightseeing. You can always use your own rented car, too—as long as you are confident driving on switchbacks and steep slopes; take Route 108 south through San Pa Tong, then turn right after 55km (34 miles), and follow the signs to the national park. You can take a 13km (8-mile) side trip to Lamphun on Route 1015.

MAE SA VALLEY ★

The lovely Mae Sa Valley area is about 20km (12 miles) northwest of Chiang Mai. A rash of condo construction and the sprouting of roadside billboards all indicate that Mae Sa Valley is being developed as a rural tourist resort, but it still has an unhurried feel. Attractions include elephant shows (with rides), a tiger camp, a snake show, a monkey show, bungee jumping, the **Queen Sirikit Botanic Gardens** (✆ **05384-1000;** www.qsbg.thaigov.net/), and orchid nurseries. Some of these attractions are packaged by Chiang Mai tour operators as a half-day trip costing about 700B.

CHIANG DAO ★

The town of Chiang Dao, 72km (45 miles) north of Chiang Mai, and its environs offer several small resort hotels and a few fun activities, but if you don't have a car, the easiest way to sightsee is by joining a day trip organized by Chiang Mai operators, which costs about 1,500B per person (half-day trips are also offered). The **Elephant Training Center Chiang Dao,** close to kilometer 56, on H107 from Chiang Mai, is rather touristy and not as good as that in Lampang (p. 342), but it's still a nice treat for kids. The adventure begins as you cross a rope bridge and walk through a forest to the camp. After the elephants bathe in the river (showering themselves and their mahouts), they demonstrate log hauling and log rolling. After the show, you can climb into a *howdah* and take a safari across the Ping River to a Lisu village.

Sixteen kilometers (10 miles) north of the Elephant Training Center is the **Chiang Dao Cave (Wat Tham Chiang Dao),** one of the area's more fascinating sites. Two caverns are illuminated by electric lights, and you can see a number of Buddha statues, including a 4m-long (13-ft.) reclining one. The row of five seated Buddhas in the first cavern is particularly impressive. The cave and two connected caverns extend over 10km (6¼ miles) into the mountain, but you'll have to hire a local guide with a lantern to explore the unlighted areas. It is open daily from 8:30am to 4:30pm, and a stop here can be included with any itinerary that brings you to the elephant camp.

14

Touring the Northern Hills

Beyond Chiang Mai and its satellite cities, travelers enter a lush, mountainous region replete with opportunities for adventure. Rugged landscape, proximity to Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, and the diverse ethnic hill-tribe groups living here distinguish northern Thailand from the rest of the country.

Connected by highways that undulate through forested mountains, descend into picturesque valleys, and pass through quaint farming villages, the country's northern points are best explored overland, in a rented vehicle (with a driver, if possible). There are lookout viewpoints along the way, and plenty of places to stop and eat, refuel, relax, and stay. Travelers can choose from a number of routes: from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai; north from Chiang Rai to the Myanmar/Laos/Thai border at the Golden Triangle; or the rugged area northwest of Chiang Mai, encircled by the Mae Hong Son Loop. Any trip in the region means mountain scenery and the opportunity to visit with unique ethnic groups; trekking by foot, jeep, elephant back, or boat through the forested hill-tribe homelands is very popular.

1 THE MAE HONG SON LOOP

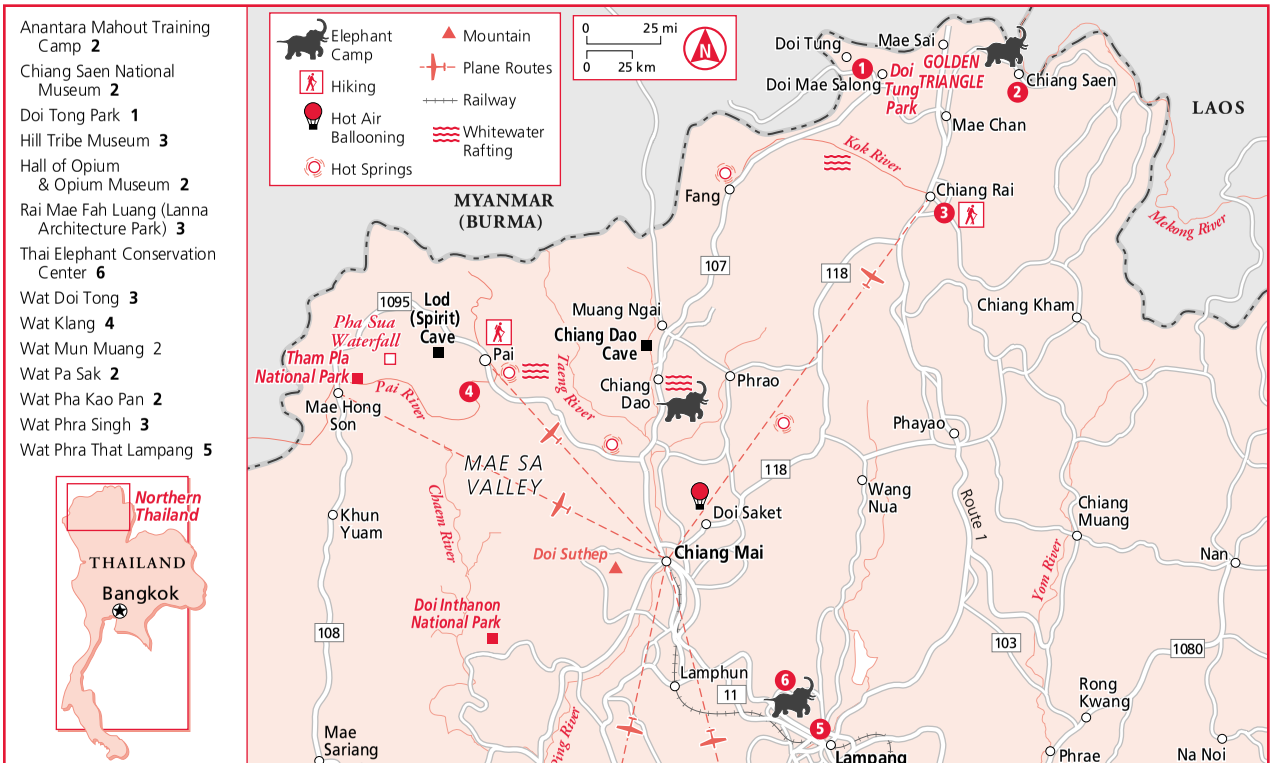
The Mae Hong Son Loop covers over 600km (373 miles) and sweeps around almost 2,000 bends as it heads through the rugged hills northwest of Chiang Mai to the well-loved tourist destinations of **Pai** and **Mae Hong Son**, then continues south to out-of-the way **Mae Sariang** and returns to **Chiang Mai** via Hot and Chom Thong on H108. For anyone wary of Thai traffic, going by tour or a hired car with driver is recommended—but a self-guided tour means freedom to take side trips and explore at one's own pace. Give yourself at least 4 days to do it, preferably more, staying 1 night at least in each town. The road, especially on the northernmost points, is serpentine and precipitous, particularly dangerous after rain, and calls for good driving skills. Traffic is normally not too heavy, but drivers must be on the alert for everything from water buffalo to slow-moving, smoke-belching trucks and buses.

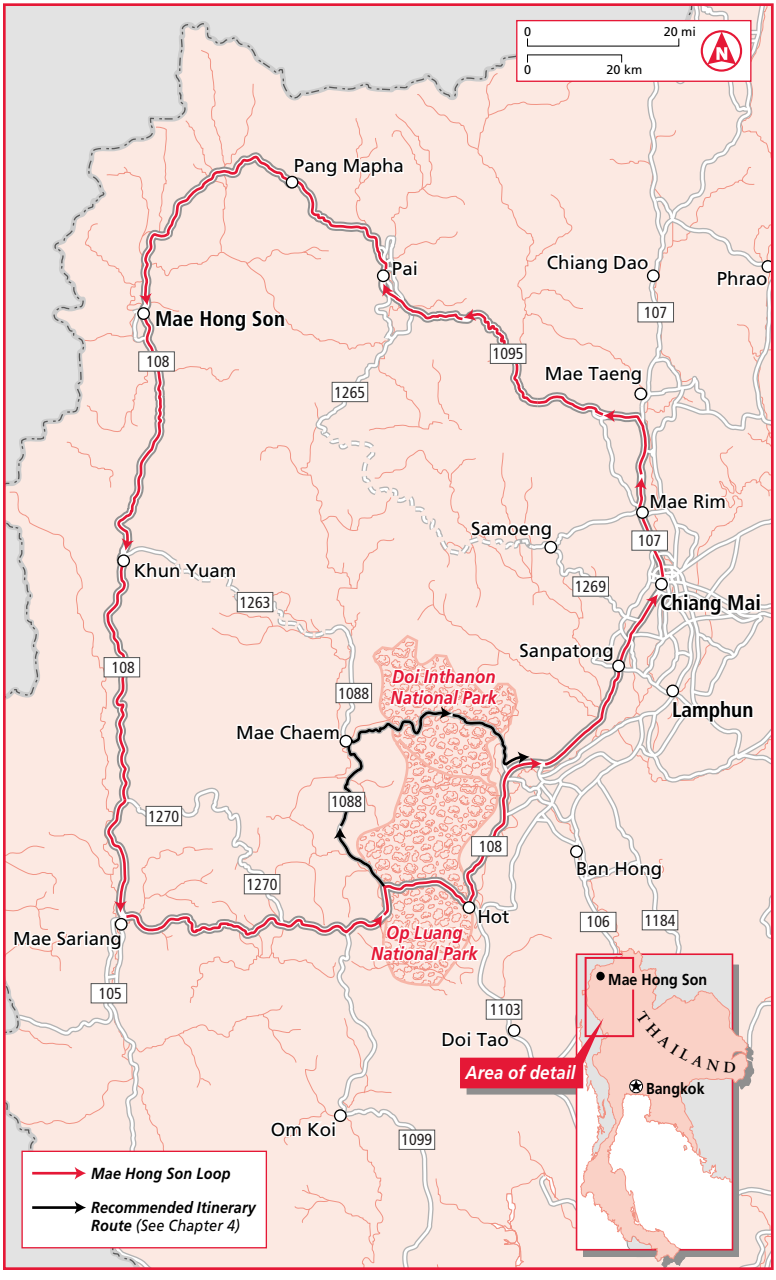
The most useful resource for a self-guided tour by car or motorbike is the map titled *Mae Hong Son, The Loop* (published by Golden Triangle Rider and priced at 200B; www.gt-rider.com). The GT-Rider map gives exact details of even the smallest dirt track as well as useful site maps of each town. You can pick it up in many bookstores, guesthouses, and restaurants in Chiang Mai (see the website for outlets). The TAT offices in Chiang Mai (p. 310) or Mae Hong Son (p. 352) are also good resources for maps and advice on side trips.

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

By Plane

Regular flights by **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com) and **SGA** (✆ **05328-0444;** www.sga.co.th) link Mae Hong Son, Pai, and Chiang Mai daily.


Elephant Camp
Hiking
Hot Air Ballooning
Hot Springs
Mountain
Plane Routes
Railway
Whitewater Rafting
0 25 mi
0 25 km
Doi Tung
Mae Sai
Doi Mae Salong
Doi Tung Park
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
Chiang Saen
LAOS
Mae Chan
Kok River
Fang
Chiang Rai
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Mekong River
107
118
1095
Lod (Spirit) Cave
Pha Sua Waterfall
(Tham Pla National Park
Pai
Muang Ngai
Chiang Dao Cave
Chiang Dao
Phrao
Chiang Kham
Pai River
Lang River
Mae Hong Son
MAE SA VALLEY
Phayao
Wang Nua
Route 1
Chiang Muang
Khun Yuam
Chaem River
Doi Saket
Doi Suthep
Chiang Mai
Nan
Doi Inthanon National Park
108
103
1080
Lamphun
11
Rong Kwang
Yom River
Ping River
Mae Sariang
Lampang
Phrae
Na Noi
Anantara Mahout Training Camp 2
Chiang Saen National Museum 2
Doi Tong Park 1
Hill Tribe Museum 3
Hall of Opium & Opium Museum 2
Rai Mae Fah Luang (Lanna Architecture Park) 3
Thai Elephant Conservation Center 6
Wat Doi Tong 3
Wat Klang 4
Wat Mun Muang 2
Wat Pa Sak 2
Wat Pha Kao Pan 2
Wat Phra Singh 3
Wat Phra That Lampang 5
Northern Thailand
THAILAND
Bangkok


0
20 mi
0
20 km
Pang Mapha
Pai
Chiang Dao
Phrao
Mae Hong Son
108
1095
107
1265
Mae Taeng
Mae Rim
Samoeng
107
Khun Yuam
1263
1269
Chiang Mai
Sanpatong
108
Doi Inthanon
National Park
1088
Lamphun
Mae Chaem
1088
1270
108
Ban Hong
1270
Hot
106
1184
Mae Sariang
Op Luang
National Park
105
1103
Doi Tao
Mae Hong Son
THAILAND
Area of detail
Bangkok
Om Koi
1099
Mae Hong Son Loop
Recommended Itinerary Route (See Chapter 4)

By Car

This is certainly the best option for doing the "loop" or even just touring the hills around Pai and Mae Hong Son. See "Getting Around," in chapter 13. Travel agents and hotels can arrange a car with driver for about 2,000B per day.

By Motorcycle

Though an increasingly popular option, this mode of transport is recommended only for experienced riders. Motorcycle travel around the Mae Hong Son Loop means less traffic than your average Thai highway, but the same warnings apply as anywhere: Wear a helmet, be defensive, and remember that there's not much between you and the road. A variety of good rental bikes is available in Chiang Mai. See the "Getting Around" section, in chapter 13, "Chiang Mai," for info.

By Minivan

A number of travel agents in Chiang Mai (p. 309) arrange group tours here by minivan.

By Bus

Regular public buses ply the winding tracks between all towns on the loop (Chiang Mai, Pai, Mae Hong Son, and Mae Sariang), but bus travelers are limited in their exploration of the countryside.

PAI ★

831km (516 miles) NW of Bangkok; 135km (84 miles) NW of Chiang Mai

Halfway between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, the mountain road makes a winding descent into a large green valley carpeted with rice paddies and fruit orchards. Mountains rise on all sides, and on warm afternoons, butterflies flit along the streets. Here you'll find a village called Pai, named after the river that runs through the valley. Pai is a speck of a place with main roads (all four of them) littered with homegrown guesthouses, laid-back restaurants and bars, local trekking companies, and small souvenir shops. It has changed from being unknown a decade ago into one of the most popular destinations in North Thailand, known more as a place to kick back and relax than run around looking at temples and museums. It attracts mostly New Agers and gap-year students doing the Southeast Asian circuit (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia).

The **Pai River** itself is one of the main attractions here. Outfitters organize rafting adventures on some pretty raucous rapids from July to January. Trekking is also popular, with 2- and 3-day treks to **Karen, Lahu, and Lisu villages**. The adventurous can find a local map for self-guided hikes to nearby waterfalls and caves, but quite a few wayfarers just lounge in town living simply and enjoying the nightlife. In Pai, it seems every day is a lazy Sunday. Many local business owners are foreigners, or bohemian Thais, who come here for a slower pace than bustling Bangkok or Chiang Mai.

Essentials

Getting There

BY AIR The only air link to Pai is from Chiang Mai on **SGA** (✆ **05328-0444;** www.sga.co.th), which flies light aircraft here; check online for current prices and schedules.

BY BUS Several public buses leave each day for Pai from Chiang Mai (trip time 3–4 hr.; fare 100B) and continue on to Mae Hong Son (trip time 3 hr.; fare 100B). The **Chiang Mai Arcade Bus Terminal** is off Kaew Nawarat Road, northeast of the Old City across

 the Ping River (✆ **05324-2664**). The **bus terminal** in **Mae Hong Son** is on Khunlumprapas Road (the main street), about 1km (⅔ mile) south of the town center.

BY MINIVAN Frequent minivans (called *rot too*) make connections between Chiang Mai, Pai, and Mae Hong Son for about 150B for each leg. These can be quicker than regular buses but may not be a good idea if you are prone to carsickness (because of all the bends). Contact any storefront travel agent for details.

BY CAR The scenic route is long, with steep winding roads that make for some very pretty rural scenery: Take Route 107 north from Chiang Mai, and then Route 1095 northwest to Pai.

Orientation & Getting Around

You won't find a formal tourist information booth in Pai, but restaurateurs, bungalow owners, and fellow travelers are usually happy to share their knowledge and experience. Most guesthouses and restaurants offer photocopied maps of town and the surrounding areas. Tiny Pai consists of four streets: Route 1095, or the Pai–Mae Hong Son Highway (colloquially known as Khetkelang Rd.), runs parallel to Rangsiyanon Road, which is the main commercial street; Chaisongkhram and Ratchadamnoen roads run perpendicular, and many guesthouses and restaurants are in or around this central grid (with many more guesthouses in the surrounding countryside). You can walk the town in 5 minutes; renting a motorcycle is the best way to explore the hills around Pai. Mountain bikes and motorcycles are available at guesthouses or shops along the main streets for about 50B and 200B per day, respectively. Motorcycles can be rented at **Aya Service** (22/1 Moo 3, Chaisongkhram Rd.; ✆ **05369-9940**); 100cc scooters start at just 100B for 24 hours, and 250cc motocross numbers go for around 500B.

Fast Facts

There's an **ATM** at the Krung Thai Bank, and another at the Bank of Ayudhaya, both on Rangsiyanon Road; they also offer money-changing services. There are **Internet cafes** along central Chaisongkhram Road.

Trekking & Adventure

Small trekking companies, operated by locals, are at every guesthouse and all along the main streets. It is hard to choose from the many options, but **Duang Trekking** (at Duang Guesthouse, across from the bus terminal; ✆ **05369-9101**) has a good reputation. Also look for **Outdoor Explorer** (15 Chaisongkhram Rd.; ✆ **05369-9815;** www.outdoorexplorer.info), which has a strong eco-tour and educational focus. Group treks go for 3 days and 2 nights to Lisu, Karen, Tai Yai, and Lahu villages in the hills around Pai for 1,500B per person (some trips include bamboo rafting). Trekking offices can tailor any trek or provide private guides according to need.

The **Pai River** is really the most exciting attraction going. Overnight **rafting** trips take you through some exciting rapids as well as more scenic lazy spots, through canyons walled with prehistoric fossilized lime and shell, and through a **wildlife sanctuary.** A pioneer of the rafting business here, longtime resident Guy Gorias runs **Thai Adventure Rafting** ★★ (Rangsiyanon Rd., in the town center; ✆ **05369-9111;** www.activethailand.com). There are regular trips from June to January. Two-day adventures begin and end in Pai, at a cost of 2,500B per person. There are many imitators in town, but Thai Adventure is the best outfitter by far, with high safety standards and quality equipment, and a good base camp on a hill above town in Pai (ask about affordable rooms for rent). They can also make the necessary arrangements for pickup and drop-off in Mae Hong Son.

You can also go on **elephant treks** out of Pai, from where there are a number of hourly, all-day, and multiday programs to choose from. In addition, a number of elephant camps are on the ridge overlooking town; the best is **Thom's Pai Elephant Camp** (5/3 Moo 4, Rangsiyanon Rd.; ✆ **05369-9286;** www.thomelephant.com/Flash).

What to See & Do

There's little in the way of tour sites in Pai (most people simply come to put their feet up), but it is a great place to stroll along country lanes or even rent a motorbike and buzz around the countryside. There are a few small temples: **Wat Klang** is next to the bus station and has several small pagodas surrounding a central stupa, and **Wat Mae Yen** sits on a low rise about 1km (⅔ mile) east of the town, across the Pai River. It's approached by a long stairway and features some interesting carvings on its solid, wooden doors. There's a **waterfall** about 7km (4⅓ miles) west of town past the hospital, and a **hot spring** about 7km (4⅓ miles) to the southeast, past the Pai High School.

Tiny Pai boasts quite a few traditional massage places. The best option is **Mr. Jan's Herbal Sauna and Massage** (no phone), where you'll get a Burmese-style massage. Ask around for directions to Mr. Jan's—it's on the narrow Soi Wanchaloem, off Chaisongkhram Road.

Where to Stay

There are now several posh resorts both outside and in town, though in the town center you'll find mostly guesthouses. You have your choice of some pretty rough little dives starting at 200B, but I've listed some comfortable options for people on any budget. Many midrange places are on the outskirts in Ban Mae Yen, Ban Mae Hi, and Ban Juang.

Note: Pai was hit with devastating flash floods in September 2005, when several riverside bungalows were swept away. Keep this in mind if considering riverside accommodation near the height of the rainy season.

Moderate

Belle Villa Resort ★★ Finds A swish, out-of-town resort consisting of pretty bungalows, built along a quiet, rural stretch of the Pai River, the Belle Villa has no rival anywhere along the Mae Hong Son Loop. Large, clean bungalow rooms boast contemporary conveniences such as digital safes and cable TV without sacrificing the rustic charm of thatched roof and bamboo walls. The yellow polished concrete bathrooms are resplendent affairs. Spacious shower areas are surrounded by small rock gardens and have windows with views to the river. The restaurant is a cozy, open affair overlooking a small pool and the riverside beyond. The peace, quiet, scenery, and friendly service of this burgeoning little idyll are matchless.

113 Moo 6, Huay Poo-WiangNua Rd., Tumbol WiangTai, Amphur Pai, Mae Hong Son 58130 (down a small *soi* off the Mae Hong Son Rd., 2km/1¼ miles north of Pai). ✆ **05369-8226.** Fax 05369-8228. www.bellevillaresort.com. 47 units. 2,350B double low season; 2,850B double high-season; 3,900B cottage. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Pai River Corner ★★ Having lost its budget riverside bungalows to flash floods in 2005, Pai River Corner has been left with only its finest rooms set in two-story, four-unit villas right in the center of town. Interiors are lavish, decorated in a modern Thai style with lots of color and local flair. Even more unique are their oversize suite and spa rooms, one with an indoor Jacuzzi the size of a duck pond. The property boasts a cozy riverside perch for drinks and dining and the location is the best in town.

94 Moo 3, Viengtai, Pai, Mae Hong Son 58130. ✆ **05369-9049.** Fax 05306-4408. www.pairivercorner.com. 9 units. 3,270B deluxe; 4,360B suite; 6,540B spa. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar, high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C.

Rim Pai Cottages Though billed as cottages, this property comprises an unassuming cluster of bungalows. You'll find little in the way of luxury, but lots of character in rooms that range from tiny, airless sheds to spacious rustic pavilions on stilts, with small balconies and riverside views. There are also only a few choice amenities: a welcoming restaurant pavilion and a helpful tour desk. It's set apart from the rougher budget accommodations by virtue of its airy campus and good location—it occupies some of the best real estate in the center of Pai Town proper, with a large river frontage.

99 Moo 3, Viengtai, Pai, Mae Hong Son 58130 (right in town at riverside). ✆ **05369-9133.** Fax 05369-9234. www.rimpaicottage.com. 37 units. 1,200B–2,300B fan bungalow; 2,600B–4,000B A/C bungalow/villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C (some), no phone.

Inexpensive

Cheap and cheerful little **Charlie's House** is in the middle of town (9 Rangsiyanon Rd.; ✆ **05369-9039**), with basic rooms with a fan from 200B or A/C units from 600B.

The Sun Hut Located across the river from town (about a 10- to 15-minute walk), the Sun Hut occupies a plot peppered with bamboo and bananas, through which runs the Mae Yen stream. All the bungalows, named after planets and zodiac signs, are individually designed and made of brick and teak, with relaxing balconies. There's also a vegetarian restaurant and communal lounging area.

28/1 Mae Yen, Pai, Mae Hong Son 58130. ✆ **05369-9730.** www.thesunhut.com. 13 units. 250B–1,300B double. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant.

Where to Dine

Little Pai plays host to a bevy of expatriate restaurants and bars as well as a whole range of streetside dining. The most popular spots in town for partying are **Ting Tong** and **Be Bop** ★, which both feature live music and are on the southern side of town on Rangsiyanon Road. At Be Bop, there's an excellent house band, and a young party crowd keeps the place hopping late into the night (about 1am). Live music starts at 9:30pm. Below are the other best restaurants in town.

Baan Benjarong ★ THAI As you overlook mountain rice paddies from this friendly and casual open-air restaurant, you can choose from a poster-size menu of delicious Thai dishes. Any of the many hearty stir-fries and spicy soups will do the trick. But I most recommend the savory curry made with crabs dipped in a sweet-and-sour sauce and the *tam long krop:* a unique dish of crispy, deep-fried gourd. This is a great place to cheaply fill up after trekking.

179 Moo 8 (adjacent to Be-bop Bar). ✆ **05369-8010.** Main courses 70B–150B. No credit cards. Daily 11am–10pm.

Baan Pai THAI Right in the center of town, Baan Pai is a fine choice for authentic Thai food in an open-air Thai house, and it's a good place for people-watching. A first-rate English-language menu offers up all manner of Thai dishes, from spicy vermicelli salads to creamy soups and fiery curries. Everything on the menu is good.

7 Moo Rangsiyanon Rd. (around the corner from the bus station). ✆ **05369-9912.** Main courses 80B–200B. No credit cards. Daily 8am–11pm.

BETWEEN PAI & MAE HONG SON

Either as a day trip from Pai or as a stop on the way to Mae Hong Son, the best little detour going is the ***lod,*** or **Spirit Cave,** off Route 1095 (about 30km/19 miles northwest of Pai on Route 1095 in the town of Soppong, and then about 8km/5 miles north of the

highway). This large, awe-inspiring cave filled with colorful stalagmites, stalactites, and small caverns will keep you exploring for hours. The cavern was discovered in the 1960s jam-packed with **antique pottery** dating from the Ban Chiang culture. There are three caves. The first chamber is a magnificent grotto and the second contains a prehistoric cave painting of a deer (which unfortunately has been largely blurred by curious fingers). The third cavern contains **prehistoric coffins** shaped like canoes.

A guide to all three caves costs 100B, with lantern rental included. Be sure to take the canoe ride to the third cave (the ferryman will hit you up for an extra 100B), where, especially in the late afternoon and evening, you can see clouds of bats and swallows vying for space in the cave's high craggy ceiling (the boat ride is fun, too). Pay again to get back by boat or you can follow the clear jungle path a few clicks back to the parking lot. Bring your own flashlight for self-exploration as well.

There are lots of little guesthouses along the road near the entrance to the Spirit Cave in Soppong; the best is the friendly **Little Eden Guesthouse** (295 Moo 1, T. Soppong; ✆ **05361-7054;** www.littleeden-guesthouse.com). It offers basic bungalows around a postage-stamp pool, as well as an authentic rustic suite overlooking the river; rates are 450B to 2,000B.

As the road curves south heading into Mae Hong Son, **Tham Pla Park** (17km/11 miles north of Mae Hong Son on Rte. 1095) is a small landscaped park leading up to the entrance of Tham Pla, or Fish Cave. It is a small grotto crowded with carp (legend says there are 10,000 of them) that mysteriously prefer the cave to the nearby streams. You can buy fish food in the parking lot (10B per packet), but the fish don't eat it. Have a look—it is meant to be good luck (and is also a good leg stretch after the long drive). The grotto, once unsuccessfully explored by Thai Navy divers, is said to be several meters deep and extends for miles.

Ten kilometers (6¼ miles) away in the Tham Pla Park interior is the huge **Pha Sua Waterfall,** which tumbles over limestone cliffs in seven cataracts. The water is at its most powerful after the rainy season in August and September. The Meo hill-tribe village of Mae Sou Yaa is beyond the park on a road suitable for jeeps, just a few kilometers from the Burmese border.

MAE HONG SON

924km (574 miles) NW of Bangkok; 355km (221 miles) NW of Chiang Mai via Pai; 274km (170 miles) NW of Chiang Mai via Mae Sariang

Not far from the Burmese border, Mae Hong Son, the provincial capital of Mae Hong Son province, is the urban center of this large patch of scenic woodlands, waterways, and unique hill-tribe villages. The town's surrounding hills, famed for their eerie morning mist, burst into color each October and November when *tung buatong* (wild sunflowers) come into bloom. The hot season (Mar–Apr) has temperatures as high as 104°F (40°C), and the rainy season is longer (May–Oct), with several brief showers daily.

The mountains around Mae Hong Son are scarred by slash-and-burn agriculture and evidence of logged teak forests from departed hill-tribe settlements. Roads, airfields, and public works projects have since opened up the scenic province, as poppy fields gave way to terraced rice paddies and garlic crops. At the same time, the surge in tourism brought foreigners trekking into villages where automobiles were still unknown. Although the busy town of Mae Hong Son continues to grow and develop, its picturesque valley setting and lovely Burmese-style *wats* (temples) are still the star attractions here.

Essentials

Getting There

BY PLANE Two daily Thai Airways flights connect Mae Hong Son to major routes via Chiang Mai (flight time: 45 min.). During the July to August and December to January peak seasons, book in advance as flights fill up early, and, in low season, check to see if the flights are actually running (flights cancel often due to fog). **Thai Airways** in Chiang Mai is at 240 Prapokklao Rd. (✆ **05392-0999** for domestic reservations in Chiang Mai; www.thaiair.com), and in Mae Hong Son at 71 Singhanat Bamrung Rd. (✆ **05361-2220**). **Nok Air** (✆ **05392-2183** or 1318; www.nokair.com) runs flights (daily during the high season) from Chiang Mai as well.

The **Mae Hong Son Airport** (airport code HGN) is in the northeast section of town, about 10 minutes from the town center. Tuk-tuks and *songtaews,* or pickups, are always waiting for passengers outside the airport.

BY BUS Non-air-conditioned buses connect with Pai (trip time 4 hr.; fare 72B) or beyond to the **Chiang Mai Arcade Bus Terminal** (trip time 8 hr.; fare 127B; ✆ **05324-2664**). Bus service to Mae Sariang to the south leaves in the morning (trip time 4 hr.; fare 100B). The bus terminal in Mae Hong Son is on Khunlumprapas Road (the main street), about a kilometer south of the main intersection.

BY CAR The 8-hour journey to Mae Hong Son from Chiang Mai is a pleasant mountain drive with spectacular views and some fun attractions (see "Between Pai & Mae Hong Son," above). The road is winding but paved and safe, with places to stop for gas, food, and toilets, as well as scenic pull-offs. Take Route 107 north from Chiang Mai to Route 1095 northwest through Pai. For car-rental info, see chapter 13, "Chiang Mai."

Visitor Information

The **TAT** office (✆ **05361-2982**), Khunlumprapas Road, opposite the post office, has helpful staff. The **Tourist Police** office (✆ **05361-1812** or 1155), Singhanat Bamrung Road, is open daily from 8:30am to 5pm.

Orientation

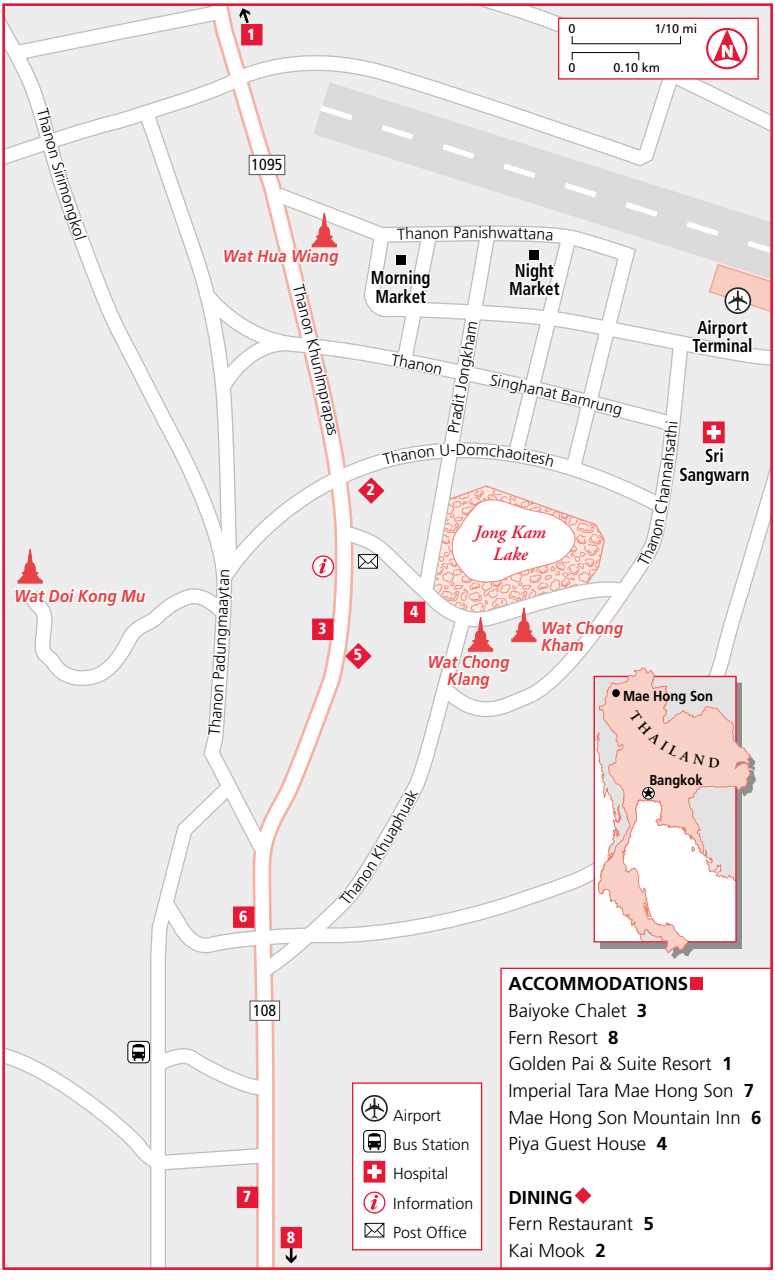
Mae Hong Son is small and easy to navigate. Khunlumprapas Road, part of the Pai–Mae Sariang Highway (Rte. 108), is the town's main street and home to travel agents, most hotels listed below, and restaurants. The main sights are **Jong Kham Lake,** just east of the main street, and **Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu,** which overlooks town from the west.

Getting Around

You can walk to most places in town, but there are a few tuk-tuks parked outside the market for longer trips. At some guesthouses, you'll find bicycle rental for 50B or 100cc motorbikes for rent at 150B to 200B per day.

Fast Facts

There are major **banks** with ATMs and currency exchanges along Khunlumprapas and Singhanat Bamrung roads. In addition, several banks are open for each flight arrival at the airport. The **Sri Sangawan Hospital** is east of town on Singhanat Bamrung Road (✆ **05361-1378**). The **post office** is opposite the King Singhanat Rajah statue. There are a few **Internet cafes** along Khunlumprapas, near the Baiyoke Chalet, most with good DSL for 40B per hour. The **Tourist Police** are at ✆ **05361-1812.**



ACCOMMODATIONS

Baiyoke Chalet **3**
Fern Resort **8**
Golden Pai & Suite Resort **1**
Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son **7**
Mae Hong Son Mountain Inn **6**
Piya Guest House **4**

DINING

Fern Restaurant **5**
Kai Mook **2**

What to See & Do

Wat Jong Klang and **Wat Jong Kham** are reflected in the serene waters of Jong Kham Lake, in the heart of town. Their striking white *chedis* (stupas) and dark teak *viharn* (assembly hall) reflect Burmese influence. Wat Jong Klang was constructed from 1867 to 1871 as an offering to Burmese monks who made the long journey here for the funeral of Wat Jong Kham's abbot. Inside are a series of folk-style glass paintings depicting the Buddha's life and a small collection of dusty Burmese wood carvings and dolls. The older Wat Jong Kham (ca. 1827) was built by King Singhanat Rajah and his queen, and is distinguished by gold-leaf columns supporting its *viharn.* Don't miss the colorful Burmese-style donation boxes; they're like musical arcade games with spinning discs and cups to drop your change in, only the end result is not "game over" but "make merit."

Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu (also known as Wat Plai Doi) dominates the western hillside above the town, particularly at night when the strings of lights rimming its two Mon pagodas are silhouetted against the dark forest. The oldest part (ca. 1860) of this compound was constructed by King Singhanat Rajah, and a 15-minute climb up its *naga* (snake) staircase rewards one with grand views of the mist-shrouded valley, blooming pink cassia trees, and Jong Kham Lake below. Below Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu, there's a 12m-long (39-ft.) **Reclining Buddha** in Wat Phra Non.

For short **1-day hill-tribe treks** in the region, **Rose Garden Tours** (86/4 Khunlumprapas Rd. in the center of town; ✆/fax **05361-1681;** www.rosegarden-tours.com) offers many options including stops at local Lahu, Shan, and Karen villages, and adventure activities such as elephant trekking and bamboo rafting.

There are two **Padaung villages** close to Mae Hong Son populated by the famed **"long-neck Karen" people,** so called because their women wear layers of brass rings around their necks, constantly adding to them to give the appearance of elongated necks. However, visits to these villages tend to upset sensitive souls when they see the plight of these people who have been driven out of their homeland (Myanmar) and are treated like zoo exhibits by their neighbors (Thailand). If you must go, Rose Garden Tours (see above) includes village visits in its all-day tours or can arrange special half-day trips. **Nai Soi** village is about 35km (22 miles) northwest of town and easily reached by car or minivan (entrance is 250B), and **Nam Phiang Din** village is accessible by boat for 750B (including entrance fee to the village). Unfortunately, these fees do not filter down to the villagers, who receive little more than a plate of rice for smiling at the cameras.

Where to Stay

The early '90s brought large-scale development to Mae Hong Son, so today there are a few decent hotel options downtown and a few rustic resorts in the surrounding hills.

Moderate

Fern Resort ★★★ Finds Out in the sticks some 8km (5 miles) south of town and just next to the Mae Surin National Park, the Fern Resort rests in a quiet valley along a rushing stream and is a dream come true for anyone wanting to stay in a genuine eco-resort. Tai Yai (Shan)–style bungalows have simple but comfortable local-style furnishings such as leaf roofs, glass windows, and doors; bathrooms offer slate-tiled showers with hot water. As you might expect in a bona fide eco-resort, there are no TVs or phones in the rooms, but this only adds to the appreciation of sounds from the jungle around. They have good trail maps of the immediate area, and experienced guides are available for more extensive treks.

64 Moo 10, Bann Hua Num Mae Sakut, T. Pha Bong, Mae Hong Son 58000 (8km/5 miles south of town). ✆ **05368-6110.** Fax 05368-6111. www.fernresort.info. 30 units. 2,500B–3,000B bungalow. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi, no phone.

Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son ★★ The Tara is the top choice for the upscale traveler in Mae Hong Son. Though it's some 2km (1¼ miles) south of town, the hotel's style, service, many amenities, and upkeep set it far above the rest. Guest rooms overlook a teak forest, garden, and stream. All furnishings are in blond wood and wicker on bowling-alley-shined floors. Most rooms have spacious balconies, and suites are large and luxurious. The serpentine free-form pool is surrounded by a wooden deck, and the open-air restaurant has views of the grounds and garden. The staff is very professional and can help with any eventuality, from day tours to flat tires.

149 Moo 8, Tambon Pang Moo, Mae Hong Son 58000 (2km/1¼ miles south of town). ✆ **05368-4444.** Fax 05368-4440. www.imperialhotels.com. 104 units. 2,464B double; from 3,653B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; lounge; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Mae Hong Son Mountain Inn You can't miss the dynamic angular spire of the oversized Thai Yai–style peaked roofs marking the entrance to this compound. The place has lots of charm and is in a good location just south of the town center. Comfortable guest rooms are arranged in two stories around lush central gardens. The hotel is a bit light on amenities, and you won't find many English speakers on staff, but they're helpful as all get-up. Spring for a deluxe room with parquet floors (instead of old carpeting), more local accents, and a bit more panache. Deluxe bathrooms are large and done up using terra-cotta tiles and granite.

112/2 Khunlumprapas Rd., T. Jong Kham, Mae Hong Son 58000 (on the southern end of the main drag). ✆/fax **05361-2284.** www.mhsmountaininn.com. 69 units. 2,400B–2,800B double; from 4,500B suite; seasonal rates and Internet discounts always available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

Baiyoke Chalet With an ideal location on the main street—and in walking distance of everything in town—this hotel offers simple, midsize rooms with high ceilings, hardwood floors, and clean guesthouse-style bathrooms. Rooms overlooking the back are quieter; the place is often overrun by adventure groups—a young and rowdy crowd sometimes. The hotel bar and restaurant, **Chalet,** looks over the main street in town, hosts live bands, and is where it's at for locals in Mae Hong Son.

90 Khunlumprapas, Jong Kham, Amphur Muang, Mae Hong Son 58000 (midtown, across from post office). ✆ **05361-3132.** Fax 05361-1533. 36 units. 930B–1,600B double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant, high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Golden Pai & Suite Resort Here's one for folks who are traveling with their own car—the Golden Pai is 5km (3 miles) north of town (toward Pai) and not accessible by public transport. Suite rooms (the best value) are large and cozy, with spacious balconies overlooking a small central pool. Mid- and low-end rooms are basic bungalows. They have a good riverside restaurant, and offer some spa treatments, as well as local adventure tours. The very friendly staff ensures that this place stays popular with groups of visiting Thais.

285 Moo 1, Ban Pangmoo, Mae Hong Son 58000. ✆ **05306-1116.** Fax 05362-0417. www.goldenpaihotel.com. 71 units. 1,500B–2,500B. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, minibar.

Piya Guest House This is the best budget choice on beautiful Jong Kham Lake, easily the nicest part of town—and a short walk to the two lakeside temples. Piya is a one-story wooden house with a garden courtyard. Basic rooms have private bathrooms,

 hot-water showers, and air-conditioning, but aren't particularly nice (be sure to check first, because many are musty). Piya also runs a trekking service and rents out bikes and motorbikes at reasonable prices.

1/1 Khunlumprapas, Soi 3, Jong Kham, Mae Hong Son (east side of Jong Kham Lake). ✆ **05361-1260.** 14 units. 600B bungalow. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, no phone.

Where to Dine

The local **Night Market,** on central Khunlumprapas, is the busiest venue in town for budget travelers. There you can sample noodle soups, crisp-fried beef, dried squid, roast sausage, fish balls, and other snacks sold by vendors for very little. It's open until late daily.

Also look for a little Italian storefront pizza joint, **La Tasca** (88/4 Khunlumprapas Rd.; ✆ **05361-1344;** daily 10am–10pm; main courses 130B–180B; no credit cards), in the town center. It's a great place for a real coffee and to watch the world go by.

Fern Restaurant and Bar ★★ THAI/INTERNATIONAL The biggest and best restaurant in town serves an especially wide variety of food for this part of the country—all of it well prepared and pleasantly served. The bar at the entrance has an inviting quality, and behind it an open-air deck stretches back toward an entertainment area with live music and a karaoke bar. If you come in the early evening, head for the far back to get a view of the mountaintop temple, Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu, in the evening glow.

87 Khunlumprapas Rd. (1½ blocks south of traffic light, on left). ✆ **05361-1374.** Main courses 80B–250B. AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

Kai-Mook THAI/CHINESE This is a tin-roofed pavilion with more style than most: Overhead lights are shaded by straw farmer's hats, and Formica tables are interspersed between bamboo columns. The Thai and Chinese menu includes Kai-mook salad (a tasty blend of crispy fried squid, cashews, sausage, and onions), and a large selection of light and fresh stir-fried dishes.

23 Udom Chaonitesh Rd. (1 block south of traffic light, turn left). ✆ **05361-2092.** Main courses 60B–170B. No credit cards. Daily 9:30am–2pm and 5:30–9pm.

MAE SARIANG: COMPLETING THE MAE HONG SON LOOP

180km (112 miles) W of Chiang Mai; 130km (81 miles) S of Mae Hong Son

The tiny town of Mae Sariang proper boasts no grand museums or shiny hilltop temples; it is just a cozy river town along the border with Myanmar and the best halfway stopover on the long southern link between Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai. Driving in the area, along Route 108, takes you past pastoral villages, scenic rolling hills, and a few enticing side trips to small local temples and waterfalls. Mae Sariang offers only basic accommodations.

Getting There

BY CAR Navigation is a cinch, but watch out for bends (there must be a thousand between Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang). Just follow Route 108 between Mae Hong Son, Mae Sariang, and Chiang Mai. Carry a good road map for following the side roads, and set aside a day for travel time.

BY BUS Standard and air-conditioned buses connect Mae Hong Son, Mae Sariang, and **Chiang Mai Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664**) along the southern leg of Route 108. Several daily non-air-conditioned buses depart Chiang Mai for the 8- to

9-hour journey and cost 178B to Mae Hong Son and 95B to stop in Mae Sariang (4 hr.). Two air-conditioned buses make the same trip and depart Chiang Mai at 11am and 9pm (319B to Mae Hong Son; 171B to Mae Sariang).

What to See & Do

The road is good and the scenery is lush on the long stretch of Route 108 west of Chiang Mai. Don't forget to stop and smell the fertilizer or take side trips wherever possible. Roadside dining and service facilities are limited, but adequate.

Sixty-three kilometers (39 miles) south of Mae Hong Son, in the village of **Khun Yuam,** you'll come to a junction with a road that no longer exists: a ghost trail remembered as "The Road of Japanese Skeletons," the path of retreat for Japanese soldiers fleeing what was Burma (now Myanmar) at the end of WWII. The road lives only in the memory of those who met the starved and dying troops, an estimated 20,000 of whom lie in mass graves in the surrounding area. The **Japanese War Museum** (just south of the junction of Rte. 108 and Rte. 163) commemorates this sorry chapter in history and is worth a visit. The museum features rusting tanks and weaponry, photos, personal effects, and written accounts (in Japanese, English, and Thai) of soldiers' struggles and the kindness of the locals.

Mae Sariang has a few outfits offering day treks and rafting (stop in any of the riverside cafes or hotels), but most people just spend a night here before making their way to Chiang Mai. It's worth a stroll around the small town center, particularly for the atmospheric, Burmese-style temples of **Wat Si Boonruang** and **Wat Utthayarom** on Wiang Mai Road.

Between Mae Sariang and **Hot,** you'll pass a turning on the left to **Mae Chaem** (H1088), a route that leads into **Doi Inthanon National Park** from the west. It is possible to return to Chiang Mai by this route, going over Thailand's highest peak (well, near the top anyway), though the more straightforward alternative is to keep on H108 to Hot, where the road turns north and passes through Chom Thong en route to Chiang Mai.

Where to Stay & Dine

There are lots of budget accommodations along the Mae Yuam River in the town center. The best choice is the **Riverhouse Resort** (6/1 Moo 2, Mae Sariang; ✆ **05368-3066;** fax 05368-3067; www.riverhousehotels.com), a small resort of cozy wooden pavilions overlooking the Yuam River. Rooms start at 1,200B. Riverhouse is also the best bet for dining in their riverside *sala* (open pavilion), but a short stroll through town will take you past any number of local greasy spoons, where the adventurous can find one-dish noodle or rice meals for next to nothing.

2 CHIANG RAI ★

780km (485 miles) NE of Bangkok; 180km (112 miles) NE of Chiang Mai

Chiang Rai is Thailand's northernmost province. The Mekong River makes its borders with Laos to the east and Myanmar to the west. The smaller yet scenic Mae Kok River, which supports many hill-tribe villages along its banks, flows right through the provincial capital of the same name.

Chiang Rai City lies some 565m (1,854 ft.) above sea level in a wide fertile valley, and its cool refreshing climate, tree-lined riverbanks, and popular but more subdued Night Market lure travelers weary of traffic congestion and pollution in Chiang Mai. Chiang

Rai also has some good accommodations choices, and many travelers use the city as a base for trekking and trips to Chiang Saen and the Golden Triangle.

Just over 100km (62 miles) north of Chiang Mai on the way to Chiang Rai, look for little **Suanthip Vana Resort** (49 Chiang Mai–Chiang Rai Rd., Tambon Takok; ✆ **05372-4226;** www.suanthipresort.com), a semiluxe property with cool honeymoon bungalows that overlook a river valley. Because the journey from Chiang Mai takes only 3 hours, it is possible to see Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle in a day trip, but you'll need to get an early start and allot a very full day, spent mostly in a vehicle.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

BY PLANE **Thai Airways** (870 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05371-1179;** www.thaiair.com) has daily flights from both Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi airports in Bangkok to Chiang Rai (flying time: 85 min.). Thailand's many budget carriers, **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999** in Bangkok; www.airasia.com), **Nok Air** (✆ **02627-2667** or 1318; www.nokair.com), **SGA** (✆ **05379-8244;** www.sga.co.th), and **One-Two-GO** (✆ **1126;** www.fly12go.com) all make regular connections.

Chiang Rai International Airport (✆ **05379-8000**) is about 10km (6¼ miles) north of town. There is a bank exchange, open daily 9am to 5pm, and a gift shop. Taxis hover outside and charge 200B to town.

BY BUS Three air-conditioned VIP 24-seat buses leave daily from Bangkok's **Northern Bus Terminal** (✆ **02936-2852**) to Chiang Rai (trip time 11 hr.; fare 859B). Buses leave hourly between 6am and 5:30pm from **Chiang Mai's Arcade Bus Terminal** (✆ **05324-2664;** trip time 3½ hr.; fare 263B VIP, 132B second-class air-conditioned). Chiang Rai's **Bus Terminal** couldn't be more conveniently located—on Phrasopsook Road, off Phaholyothin Road, near the night market just in the center of town. Tuk-tuks and *samlors* (pedicabs) are easy to catch here for trips around town, which cost from 40B to 60B.

BY CAR The fast, not particularly scenic, route from Bangkok is Highway 1 North, direct to Chiang Rai. The direct route from Chiang Mai is along Route 118. A slow, attractive approach on blacktop mountain roads is on Route 107 north from Chiang Mai to Fang, and then Route 109 east to Highway 1.

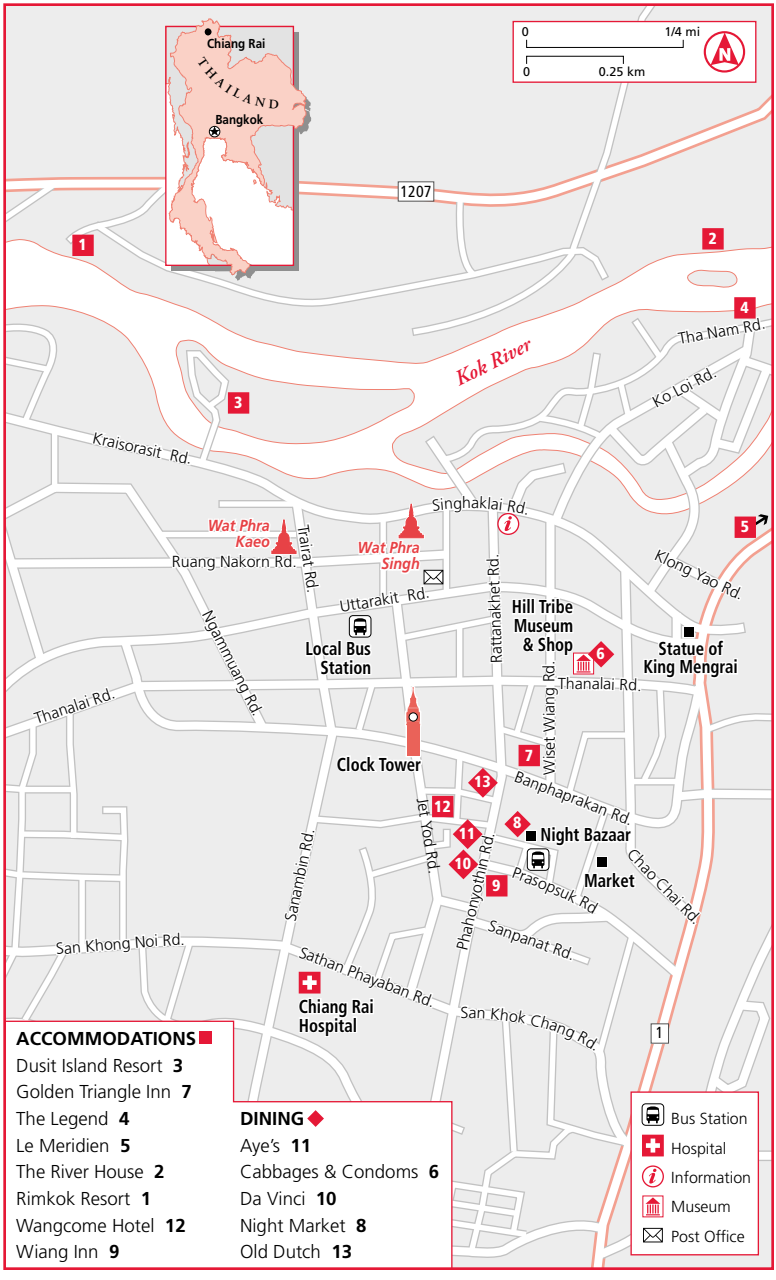
Visitor Information

The **TAT** (✆ **05374-4674**) is located at 448/16 Singhaklai Rd., near Wat Phra Singh on the north side of town; and the Tourist Police (✆ **1155**) are located on Phaholyothin Road, by the junction with Wisetwiang Road. The monthly guide *Welcome to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai* is distributed free by some hotels and has a good, reliable map of the town.

Orientation

Chiang Rai is a small city, with most services grouped around the main north-south street, Phaholyothin Road. There are three noteworthy landmarks: the small clock tower in the city's center; the statue of King Mengrai (the city's founder), at the northeast corner of the city, on the Superhighway to Mae Chan; and the Mae Kok River, at the north edge of town.

Singhaklai Road is the main artery on the north side of town, parallel to the river. The bus station is on Prasopsuk Road, 1 block east of Phaholyothin Road, near the Wiang Inn Hotel. The Night Market is on Phaholyothin Road, next to the bus station.


Chiang Rai
THAILAND
Bangkok
0 1/4 mi
0 0.25 km
1207
1
2
3
4
5
Kok River
Tha Nam Rd.
Ko Loi Rd.
Kraisorasit Rd.
Singhaklai Rd.
Wat Phra Kaeo
Wat Phra Singh
Ruang Nakorn Rd.
Trairat Rd.
Uttarakit Rd.
Ngammuang Rd.
Rattanakhet Rd.
Klong Yao Rd.
Hill Tribe Museum & Shop
Statue of King Mengrai
Local Bus Station
Thanalai Rd.
Clock Tower
Wiset Wiang Rd.
Banphaprakan Rd.
Jet Yod Rd.
Night Bazaar
Market
Chao Chai Rd.
Prasopsuk Rd
Phahonyothin Rd.
Sanambin Rd.
Sanpanat Rd.
San Khong Noi Rd.
Sathan Phayaban Rd.
San Khok Chang Rd.
Chiang Rai Hospital
ACCOMMODATIONS
Dusit Island Resort 3
Golden Triangle Inn 7
The Legend 4
Le Meridien 5
The River House 2
Rimkok Resort 1
Wangcome Hotel 12
Wiang Inn 9
DINING
Aye's 11
Cabbages & Condoms 6
Da Vinci 10
Night Market 8
Old Dutch 13
Bus Station
Hospital
Information
Museum
Post Office

Getting Around

BY SAMLOR OR TUK-TUK You'll probably find walking to be the best way to get around town. However, there are *samlors* parked outside the Night Market and on the banks of the Mae Kok River; they charge 30B to 40B for in-town trips. During the day, there are tuk-tuks, which charge 40B to 60B for in-town trips.

BY BUS Chiang Rai's frequent local buses are the easiest and cheapest way to get to nearby cities. All leave from the bus station on Prasopsuk Road, near the Wiang Inn Hotel.

BY MOTORCYCLE Motorcycling is another good way to get out of town. **Soon Motorcycle,** 197/2 Trirat Rd. (✆ **05371-4068**), charges 200B for a 100cc motorbike.

BY CAR **Budget** has a branch at the Golden Triangle Inn (see "Where to Stay," below), 590 Phaholyothin Rd. (✆ **05374-0442**), offering the standard rate beginning at 1,500B for a Honda Jazz.

Fast Facts

Several **bank** exchanges are located on Phaholyothin Road in the center of town and are open daily from 8:30am to 10pm. The **post office** is on Utarakit Road, 2 blocks north of the Clock Tower. There are a few **Internet cafes** along the main drag, Phaholyothin Road, with service for as little as 30B per hour.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Wat Phra Kaew, on Trairat Road, on the northwest side of town, is the best known of the northern *wats* because it once housed the Emerald Buddha, now at Bangkok's royal Wat Phra Kaew. Near its Lanna-style chapel is the *chedi,* which (according to legend) was struck by lightning in 1436 to reveal the precious green jasper Buddha. There is now a green jade replica of the image on display in a pavilion behind the *viharn.*

Wat Phra Singh is 2 blocks east of Wat Phra Kaew. The restored *wat* is thought to date from the 15th century. Inside is a replica of the Phra Sihing Buddha, a highly revered Theravada Buddhist image; the original was removed to Chiang Mai's Wat Phra Singh.

The Burmese-style **Wat Doi Tong** (Phra That Chomtong) sits atop a hill above the northwest side of town, up a steep staircase off Kaisornrasit Road, and offers an overview of the town and a panorama of the Mae Kok valley. It is said that King Mengrai himself chose the site for his new Lanna capital from this very hill. The circle of columns at the top of the hill surrounds the city's new *lak muang* (city pillar), built to commemorate the 725th anniversary of the city and King Bhumibol's 60th birthday. It is often criticized for its failure to represent local style. (You can see the old wooden *lak muang* in the *viharn* of the *wat.*)

The **Population and Community Development Association (PDA),** 620/1 Thanalai Rd., east of Wisetwiang Road (✆ **05374-0088**), is an NGO responsible for some of the most effective tribal development projects in the region. The popular Cabbages & Condoms restaurants, with branches here and in Bangkok (and a resort in Pattaya), carry their important message of safe sex and family planning.

On the top floor of this office is a small **Hill-tribe Museum** (no phone) that's heavy on shopping and light on museum exhibits, but the admission goes to a good cause. It's open Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am to 6pm, and admission is 50B.

The **Mae Kok River** is one of the most scenic attractions in Chiang Rai. You can hire a longtail boat to ferry you up and down the river. You'll have the option of stopping at the Buddha cave (a temple within a cavern), an elephant camp (for trekking), a hot spring, and a riverside Lahu village. Trips are about 2,000B per person for a group of three to five people. The ferry pier is beyond the bridge, across from the Dusit Island Resort. Contact **Maesalong Tours,** 882–4 Phaholyothin Rd. (✆ **05371-2515;** fax 05371-1011), or ask at your hotel.

TREKKING & HILL-TRIBE TOURS

Most of the **hill-tribe villages** within close range of Chiang Rai have long ago been set up for routine visits by group tours (not recommended). If your time is too limited for a trek, in-town travel agencies offer day trips to the countryside and areas less traveled. Guided tours with transport are priced on a two-person minimum and greater discounts are available for groups of three or more.

The best operation in Chiang Rai is **Golden Triangle Tours** ★, 590/3 Phaholyothin Rd. (✆ **05371-3918;** fax 05371-3963; www.goldenchiangrai.com). They are professional and experienced, offer an array of tours, and cater to personal interests. For hill-tribe treks, choose anything from a day trip to a week of adventure. **Day trips** to surrounding villages begin at 1,600B and can include light trekking to villages as well as elephant trekking for groups of two or three people (private tours cost a bit more). **Longer treks** range in price from 4,100B to 7,800B for a 2- to 4-day sojourn among Akha, Hmong, Yao, Karen, and Lahu tribes.

WHERE TO STAY

This city of 40,000 has an impressive 2,000 hotel rooms, but group tours fill them up in high season. Most hotels are within walking distance of the sights and shopping, though an increasing number of fancy resorts are located by the river or out of town.

Expensive

Le Meridien ★★ Kids In an idyllic setting by the Kok River, a few kilometers from the town center, Le Meridien is a clever blend of contemporary chic and traditional design. Spread out over five wings, the resort's rooms enjoy views of a private lake, lush lawns, and the river. The rooms themselves are spacious with stylish furnishings, including walk-in closets and desks, and high-speed Internet access. There are plenty of activities on-site, such as spa treatments, yoga classes, and a well-equipped gym, and trekking, boat tours, or biking tours in the hills around. There's also a shuttle service into town to see the sights or go shopping.

221/2 Moo 20, Kwaewai Rd., Tambon Robwieng, Chiang Rai 57000. ✆ **05360-3333.** www.lemeridien.com. 159 units. 7,450B–9,750B double; 14,750B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; fitness center; kids' club; outdoor pool; spa. *In-room:* A/C, satellite TV, DVD, high-speed Internet, minibar.

The River House ★★ The River House is a luxurious campus just across the river from town (near Rimkok Resort; see below). Set around a large pool flanked by laughing elephant sculptures, the resort has a full-service spa and dining area. Rooms are all a very high standard, similar almost to a stylish city hotel, with elegant built-in wooden cabinetry and fine furnishings. Second-floor rooms flank a large veranda overlooking farmers' fields at riverside—they're a great place to watch the dragonflies at dusk. River House caters mostly to high-end Thai travelers and an increasing number of European and North Americans. They have regular evening shuttles to town, and the front-desk staff is very friendly and helpful.

482 Moo 4, Tambon Rim Kok, Chiang Rai 57100. ✆ **05375-0829.** Fax 05375-0822. www.riverhouse-chiangrai.com. 36 units. 6,300B deluxe; 8,900B suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; health club; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Dusit Island Resort Hotel ★★ One of Chiang Rai's best resorts occupies a large delta island in the Kok River. The resort offers international comfort at the expense of local flavor and homeyness. The dramatic lobby is a soaring space of teak, marble, and glass, as grand as any in Thailand, with panoramic views of the Mae Nam Kok. Rooms are luxuriously appointed in pastel cottons and teak trim. The Dusit Island has manicured grounds, a pool, and numerous facilities, making the resort quite self-contained. The hotel's most formal dining room is Peak, on the 10th floor, with sweeping views and a grand terrace overlooking the river; the food is pricey but good. Chinatown is a more casual Cantonese restaurant serving a great dim sum lunch.

1129 Kraisorasit Rd., Chiang Rai 57000 (over bridge at northwest corner of town). ✆ **05360-7999.** Fax 05371-5801. www.dusit.com. 268 units. 3,240B–3,510B superior/deluxe double; from 5,220B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lounge; pub; airport transfers; babysitting; executive floor; fitness center; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service; sauna; steam room; lit tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, high-speed Internet, minibar.

The Legend Chiang Rai ★ The Legend is a unique and attractive rural boutique resort. Rooms are private sanctuaries with smooth-finish concrete and stucco walls; the end result is a crisp, modern look, with many natural touches. Some rooms overlook the river, others line a narrow garden pond, and all have great indoor and outdoor sitting areas, which allow for a constant connection with your surroundings. There are a few different configurations, including huge private pool villas and family suites, but all include large outdoor shower areas, some with a Jacuzzi bathtub, and large, luxuriant canopy beds. One highlight is the small infinity-edge pool at the center of the resort. They have a great spa with outdoor *salas* and indoor treatment rooms, and the resort runs a number of day trips and activities. It may not have the reputation, or all the facilities, of the nearby Dusit, but it has endless charm.

124/15 Moo 21, Kohloy Rd., Chiang Rai 57000. ✆ **05391-0400.** Fax 05371-9650. www.thelegend-chiangrai.com. 76 units. 3,900B–5,900B studio; 8,100B pool villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Rimkok Resort Hotel ★ Everything is done on a large scale at the Rimkok. Public spaces are capped with high-peaked Thai roofs and are grand, featuring Thai decor and artwork. Lushly planted lawns surround the large central pool. Guest rooms are airy, with high ceilings/balconies and some Thai touches—the end result is an overall bland but comfortable setup. Though the resort is rather distant from town, it's thoroughly self-contained enough that you may not need to venture out. The Rimkok Resort offers shuttle service to town (to visit the market). Because it's popular with group tours, the place sometimes gets overrun. Discounts are frequently available.

6 Moo 4, Tathorn Rd., Chiang Rai 57100 (on Kok River, about 2km/1¼ miles north of town center). ✆ **05371-6445.** Fax 05371-5859. www.rimkokresort.com. 256 units. 1,950B double; from 6,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar and lounge; airport transfers; babysitting; high-speed Internet; Jacuzzi; large outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Wangcome Hotel The Wangcome is located just a stone's throw from the Night Market. Rooms are small but comfortable, detailed with Lanna Thai touches such as fine-carved teak headboards. Central rooms face an outdoor swimming pool. There's a

lively coffee shop and a moody cocktail lounge, a popular rendezvous spot after the Night Market closes.

869/90 Pemawibhata Rd., Chiang Rai 57000 (west off Phaholyothin Rd.). ✆ **05371-1800.** Fax 05371-2973. www.wangcome.com. 234 units. 1,600B–2,200B double; from 4,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lounge; airport transfers; high-speed Internet; small pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Wiang Inn ★ Wiang Inn has a convenient location (just around the corner from the bus station and Night Market), and is a just a notch better than the Wangcome Hotel (see above). Large rooms are trimmed in dark teak, with pale teak furniture and Thai artwork—including Lanna murals over the beds and ceramic vase table lamps. It is very well maintained, despite the steady stream of group tours, which makes an early booking advisable.

893 Phaholyothin Rd., Chiang Rai 57000 (center of town, south of bus station). ✆ **05371-1533.** Fax 05371-1877. www.wianginn.com. 260 units. 2,800B–3,200B double; from 6,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar and karaoke lounge; babysitting; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

The Golden Triangle Inn ★★ Value A charming little hotel that offers comfort and lots of style and character, Golden Triangle is set in its own quiet little garden patch—once inside you'd never believe bustling Chiang Rai is just beyond the front entrance. Large rooms have terra-cotta tile floors, traditional-style furniture, and reproductions of Lanna artifacts and paintings. The owners and management are very down to earth and extremely helpful; they are the local operators of Budget Car Rental, and their in-house travel agency, **Golden Triangle Tours,** is the best choice in town for arranging travel in the area. Their restaurant is excellent, too.

590 Phaholyothin Rd., Chiang Rai 57000 (2 blocks north of bus station). ✆ **05371-3918.** Fax 05371-3963. www.goldenchiangrai.com. 30 units. 900B double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet. *In room:* A/C, no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

The Night Market is the best for budget eats here, but beyond that there are a few good restaurants from which to choose. Be sure to sample the town's delicacies, such as the *kaeng hang lay* or Burmese-style pork curry, the litchis (lychees) which ripen in April, and the sweet pineapple wine.

Cabbages & Condoms ★ THAI A sister restaurant to Cabbages & Condoms in Bangkok, this northern branch was opened by the Population & Community Development Association to promote their humanitarian work in the region. The extensive Thai menu is excellent and features local catfish. They play host to lots of events and live bands, and it is a popular stop for tour groups, which also come for the exhibit upstairs (see "What to See & Do," above).

620/25 Thanalai Rd. ✆ **05371-9167.** Main courses 80B–200B. MC, V. Daily 10am–11pm.

Old Dutch ★★ INTERNATIONAL/THAI Conveniently located on Phaholyothin Road near the bus station and Night Market, this stylish place, decked out with chunky furniture, is an ideal choice for a group when some want to eat Thai and others prefer Western food. They serve up some great steaks and salads, and several Indonesian dishes usually appear on the menu too. Thai dishes are tasty, but toned down for Western tastes,

 so if you like it spicy, just say, *"Ow phet."* Service is efficient and attentive, and there's draught beer on tap as well.

541 Phaholyothin Rd. (no phone). Entrees 80B–250B. MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

The Night Market/Food Stalls ★ THAI Every night after 6pm, the cavernous, tin-roofed Municipal Market at the town center comes alive with dozens of chrome-plated food stalls that serve steamed, grilled, and fried Thai treats. This is where locals meet, greet, and eat. It's really the heart of the town (and a busy mercantile market as well), so don't miss a wander here even if you're not into street-eats. For standard dining in the market, try **Rattanakosin,** a little marketside edifice done up in contemporary Thai style and serving good local cuisine (mostly for tour groups). Just outside the main entrance to the market on the main drag is **Aye's Restaurant** (869/170 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05375-2534**), serving some familiar, if not all that exciting, European fare. Also try **Da Vinci** (879/4–5 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05375-2535**), an Italian restaurant with good fresh salads, thin-crust pizzas, and pasta.

SHOPPING

The arrival of regular busloads of tourists has made Chiang Rai a magnet for hill-tribe clothing and crafts. You'll find many boutiques in the Night Market, near the bus terminal off Phaholyothin Road, as well as some fine shops scattered around the city.

CHIANG RAI AFTER DARK

The main activity is wandering the **Night Market,** which is really just a more toned-down version of the raucous Night Bazaar in Chiang Mai. Like its big-city model, you can find a few bars and clubs (a bit seedy but fun). In Chiang Rai, there are the standard "beer bar" storefronts with such names as **Cat Bar, Lobo,** and **Butterfly** lining Jed Yod Road, which runs parallel to Phaholyothin Road a block to the west.

CHIANG RAI TO MAE SAI

This is a popular "visa run" route, where you can cross the border at Mae Sai to Myanmar and reenter Thailand for another 30 days (as long as you have not been in Thailand for 60 consecutive days previously; you'll have to pay 500B). Most visitors coming from Chiang Rai zip through the little border town of Mae Sai on their way to the Golden Triangle and Chiang Saen, but the town is worth a stop. It is the northernmost point in Thailand.

Just to the right of the border gate to Myanmar (the end of the highway), you'll find a busy market area with rows of tacky souvenirs—and silver jewelry brought from Myanmar. There is also a busy hotel used mostly by Thai tourists and gem traders, the **Wang Thong Hotel** (299 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05373-3388;** from 1,000B double). It has spacious rooms, a pool, a pub, and a dance club, and is almost hidden behind lanes of souvenir stalls. ***Warning:*** Don't be tempted by the offer of cheap rubies or sapphires, as such offers are almost certainly a scam.

3 CHIANG SAEN ★ & THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

935km (581 miles) NE of Bangkok; 239km (149 miles) NE of Chiang Mai

The small village of Chiang Saen, the gateway to the Golden Triangle area, has a sleepy, rural charm, as if the waters of the Mekong carry a palpable calm from nearby Myanmar

and Laos. The road from Chiang Rai (59km/37 miles) follows the small Mae Nam Chan River past coconut groves and lush rice paddies. Poinsettias and gladiola decorate thatched Lanna Thai houses with peaked rooflines that extend into Xs like buffalo horns.

Little Chiang Saen, the birthplace of expansionary King Mengrai, was abandoned for the new Lanna capitals of Chiang Rai, then Chiang Mai, in the 13th century. With the Mekong River and the Laos border hemming in its growth, modern developers went elsewhere. Today, the slow rural pace, decaying regal *wats,* crumbling fort walls, and overgrown moat contribute to its appeal.

Once upon a time, the Golden Triangle was the center point of many illicit activities. The name was given to the area where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar come together—a proximity that facilitated overland drug transportation of opium and heroin in its first steps toward international markets. Thai authorities have mounted a concerted effort to stop the drug traffic here and, while some illegal activity goes unchecked, the area is hardly dangerous. Rather, Sob Ruak, the Thai town at the junction of the Kok and Mekong rivers, is a long and disappointing row of souvenir stalls, with a few "Golden Triangle" signs for photo souvenirs. Still, if you stand at the crook of the river, you can look to the right to see Laos and to the left to see Myanmar (Burma). When the river is low, a large sandbar appears that is apparently unclaimed by any authority.

A common route here is to leave from Chiang Rai by car (or motorbike) and travel directly north to the Burmese border town of **Mae Sai,** a great stop for souvenir shopping. Then follow the Mekong River going east along the border, making a stop at **The Hall of Opium,** and the town of **Sob Ruak,** before catching the museum and many temples of Chiang Saen. If you're overnighting in the area, the fanciest places are in the Golden Triangle proper (west of Chiang Saen).

ESSENTIALS

Getting There

By Bus

Buses from **Chiang Rai's Bus Terminal** (p. 358) leave every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm (trip time 1½ hr.; fare 35B). The bus drops you on Chiang Saen's main street, where the museum and main temples are within walking distance.

By Car

Take the Superhighway Route 110 north from Chiang Rai to Mae Chan, and then route 1016 northeast to Chiang Saen.

Orientation

Route 1016 is the village's main street, also called Phaholyothin Road, which terminates at the Mekong River. Along the river road there are a few guesthouses, eateries, and souvenir, clothing, and food stalls.

The Golden Triangle and the town of Sob Ruak are just 10km (6¼ miles) north of the town of Chiang Saen, and the choicest accommodations (the Anantara and the Four Seasons) are just a few clicks west from there. Mae Sai is some 30km (19 miles) west of the Golden Triangle.

Getting Around

On Foot

There's so little traffic, it is a pleasure to walk around here; most of the temple ruins are within a 15-minute walk of the town center, though you'll need transport for the more far-flung sites.

By Bicycle & Motorcycle

It's a great bike ride (45 min.) from Chiang Saen to the prime nearby attraction, the Golden Triangle. The roads are well paved and pretty flat. Bicycles are also ideal for exploring Chiang Saen's more remote temples. Several places on the main road have bicycles for 50B per day, and 100cc motorcycles for 200B per day, as does Gin's Guest House (✆ **05365-0847**), 2km (1¼ miles) north of the center beside the river.

By Songtaew

Public *songtaews* make frequent trips between Chiang Saen and the Golden Triangle for about 50B. They leave from the eastern end of Phaholyothin Road, near the river.

By Longtail Boat

Longtail boat captains down by the river offer Golden Triangle tours for as little as 800B per boat (seating eight) per half-hour. Many people enjoy the half-hour cruise, take a walk around the village of Sob Ruak after they've seen the Golden Triangle, and then continue by bus.

Fast Facts

A **Siam Commercial Bank** is in the middle of the town's main street, Phaholyothin Road, Route 1016. It's close to the **bus stop,** the **post and telegram office** (with no overseas service and few local telephones), the **police station,** and such attractions as the Chiang Saen National Museum. There are **currency exchange** booths at the Golden Triangle.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Allow half a day to see all of Chiang Saen's historical sights before exploring the Golden Triangle. To help with orientation, make the museum your first stop. There is a good map about local historical sites on the second floor.

The **Chiang Saen National Museum** (702 Phaholyothin Rd.; ✆ **05377-7102;** Wed–Sun 8:30am–4:30pm; admission 100B) houses a small but very fine collection of this region's historic and ethnographic products. The ground floor's main room has a collection of large bronze and stone Buddha images dating from the 15th to the 17th century. Pottery from Sukhothai-era kiln sites is displayed downstairs and on the balcony. The handicrafts and cultural items of local hill-tribes on display here are fascinating, particularly the display of Nam Bat, an ingenious fishing tool. Burmese-style lacquerware, Buddha images, and wood carvings scattered through the museum reinforce the similarities seen between Chiang Saen and its spiritual counterpart, Pagan (in Myanmar). Allow an hour to carefully go through the museum.

Wat Pa Sak, the best preserved *wat* here, is set in a landscaped historical park that contains a large, square-based stupa and six smaller *chedis* and temples. The park preserves what's left of the compound's 1,000 teak trees. The *wat* is said to have been constructed in 1295 by King Saen Phu to house relics of the Buddha, though some historians believe its ornate combination of Sukhothai and Pagan styles dates it later. The historical park is about 200m (656 ft.) west of the Chiang Saen Gate (at the entrance to the village). It is open daily 8am to 6pm; admission is 50B.

The area's second-oldest *wat* is still an active Buddhist monastery, and is located right next to the National Museum. **Wat Chedi Luang** has a huge brick *chedi* that dominates the main street. The *wat* complex was established in 1331 under the reign of King Saen Phu and was rebuilt in 1515 by King Muang Kaeo. The old brick foundations of the *viharn,* now supporting a very large, plaster seated Buddha flanked by smaller ones, are

all that remain. Small bronze and stucco Buddhas excavated from the site are now in the museum. It is open daily from 8am to 6pm. Admission is free.

There are several other *wats* of note in the town center. **Wat Mung Muang** is the 15th-century square-based stupa seen next to the post office. Above the bell-shaped *chedi* are four small stupas. Across the street, you can see the bell-shaped *chedi* from **Wat Phra Buat.** It's rumored to have been built by the prince of Chiang Saen in 1346, though historians believe it is of the same period as Mung Muang.

If you're exploring by bicycle or motorbike, head for **Wat Phra That Chom Kitti,** in the northwest corner of the Old City. Its main feature is a slender, slightly leaning, 25m (82-ft.) *chedi,* but the site is also worth visiting, as it sits on a small hill and offers great views of the town and across the river to Laos.

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

The infamous Golden Triangle (10km/6¼ miles north of Chiang Saen) is the point where Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos meet at the confluence of the broad, slow, and silted Mekong and Ruak rivers. They create Thailand's northern border, separating it from overgrown jungle patches of Myanmar to the west and forested, hilly Laos to the east. The area's appeal as a vantage point over forbidden territories is quickly diminishing, as there is now a legal crossing into Laos from nearby Chiang Khong.

Nonetheless, a look at the home of ethnic hill-tribes and their legendary opium trade is still interesting, and there are some good sites to see. In fact, the appeal of this geopolitical phenomenon has created an entire village—Sob Ruak—of thatch souvenir stalls, cheap riverview soda and noodle shops, and large, fancy hotels. In addition, the two attractions below are worth visiting.

The Hall of Opium ★★★ Sponsored by the late Princess Mother as part of a larger effort to educate and find alternatives to opium cultivation for hill-tribe peoples of the north, this museum complex covers some 16 hectares (40 acres) of garden overlooking the Mekong. You enter the museum and follow a long corridor through a mountain. In the dark, all you can see are a few murals that portray the pain and anguish of addiction, and then emerge in a grand atrium with a large glowing golden triangle (the irony is a bit much). From there a multimedia romp of films and light-up displays tell of the growth of the poppy, its vital importance in British and international trade with China, the many conflicts over opium, the drug's influx into Thailand, and recent efforts to suppress international smuggling and address rampant addiction throughout the region.

Media-savvy exhibits are in both Thai and English. The "Hall of Excuses" at the end highlights (or lowlights?) many of the world's most well-known addicts, and the museum ends in the "Hall of Reflections," where guests are invited to ruminate on their experience. And it *is* an experience (taking about 1½ hr. to go through). There's nothing like it anywhere else in Thailand.

11km/6¾ miles north of Chiang Saen. ✆ **0578-4444.** www.goldentrianglepark.org. Admission 300B. Tues–Sun 10am–3:30pm.

Opium Museum The hand-painted description and battered old display cases here pale in comparison to the multimedia extravaganza that is the Hall of Opium (see above), but here you can find much of the same info about opium's cultivation, distribution, and place in global trade. There's lots of paraphernalia and a certain battered charm to the place (plus there's a good little souvenir shop and toilet stop for those on the way to Chiang Saen).

212 House of Opium, Chiang Saen (just opposite the golden Buddha, at the very heart of the Golden Triangle). ✆ **05378-4060.** Admission 50B. Daily 7am–8pm.

WHERE TO STAY

There are a few cozy guesthouses in Chiang Saen and some fine resort hotels in the Golden Triangle area. The area is scenic and relaxing.

Very Expensive

Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle ★★★ Finds The superbly swish Anantara is a triumph of upscale, local design. Every detail reminds you that you're in the scenic hill-tribe region; and the resort's elegance and style depend on locally produced weavings, carved teak panels, and expansive views of the juncture of the Ruak and Mekong rivers. The balconied rooms have splendid views and are so spacious and private that you will feel like you're in your own bungalow. Tiled foyers lead to large bathrooms, and bedrooms are furnished in teak and traditional fabrics. The hotel supports a small elephant camp, and its busy tour desk can arrange any number of trips to far-flung corners of the region (or just across the road to the Hall of Opium). Rooms are a luxurious city hotel standard, many with windows connecting large bathrooms with the main room area. This and the neighboring Four Seasons Tented Camp are the top choices in the far north hills.

229 Moo 1, Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai 57150. (above river, 11km/6¾ miles north of Chiang Saen). ✆ **05378-4084.** Fax 05378-4090. http://goldentriangle.anantara.com. 77 units. From 13,500B double; 27,000B suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lounge and bar; airport transfers; babysitting; bike rental; fitness center; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; room service; spa; outdoor lit tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV w/in-house movies, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Four Seasons Tented Camp ★★★ If you want to imagine that you're a 19th-century explorer in the wilds of Asia, but with all modern comforts, here's the place to indulge yourself. To call them "tents" does not do justice to these palatial lodgings set on a hillside above the Golden Triangle. This resort is all-inclusive, so the high rates include everything, from fantastic gourmet meals to spa treatments, and boat trips on the river to mahout training classes at the elephant camp that it shares with the Anantara (see above). The all-inclusive nature of the place also means there's a minimum stay of 2 nights. The huge tents, all enjoying total privacy, have large balconies, huge soft beds, and period furnishings such as brass bathtubs and ancient telephones. It's enough to make you want to settle down at the desk at sunset and record the day's events in your journal for posterity.

P.O. Box 18, Chiang Saen P.O., Chiang Rai 57150 (next to Anantara on the Ruak River). ✆ **05391-0200.** Fax 05365-2189. www.fourseasons.com/goldentriangle. 15 units. 70,000B tent (2-night minimum). AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; high-speed Internet; outdoor pool; spa. *In-room:* A/C, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

The Imperial Golden Triangle Resort ★ This five-story hotel block stands in the western corner of the tiny souvenir village of Sob Ruak. Modern, spacious guest rooms with pastel and rattan decor have large balconies, and the more expensive rooms overlook the Golden Triangle. It is a fine, comfortable choice if you're passing through, but pales in comparison to the nearby Anantara and Four Seasons (see above).

222 Golden Triangle, Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai (in Sob Ruak, 11km/6¾ miles north of Chiang Saen). ✆ **05378-4001.** Fax 05378-4006. www.imperialhotels.com. 73 units. 2,464B–2,719B double; from 5,750B

Onward to Laos

Many make Chiang Rai or Chiang Saen their last port of call in Thailand and head overland to rugged but inviting Laos. It is possible to travel downriver 70km (43 miles) to Chiang Khong, a small border town (buses and local *songtaews* also make the connection from either Chiang Rai or Chiang Saen). Most travelers head right across the border, but if you are stuck in Chiang Khong, try **Ban Tammila** (✆ **05379-1234**), with basic rooms overlooking the river, from 350B; or **Reuan Thai Sophaphan** (✆ **05379-1023**), right next door with slightly fancier rooms, some with A/C, from 350B to 600B. You'll need to arrange a visa to enter Laos, which is best done in Bangkok or Chiang Mai at any travel agency. Once you're over the border, the slow boat to Luang Prabang is rugged but memorable. Pick up *Frommer's Southeast Asia* or check out www.frommers.com for more information on travel in Laos.

suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; lounge; high-speed Internet; pool. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, fridge, minibar.

Inexpensive

Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel This is the best choice for in-town, budget accommodations in Chiang Saen. The River Hill is about 1km (⅔ mile) south of the main drag. Guest rooms are concrete-block rooms with simple tile floors but are dressed in northern finery, with woodcarving details and funky little Lanna-style seating arrangements (axe cushions around low tables under regal umbrellas). The large and colorful coffee shop (in shades of blue and aqua with little star lights from the ceiling) is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with good selections and a relaxed and refreshing atmosphere.

714 Moo 3, Sukhapibansai 2 Rd., Tambon Viang, Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai (5-min. *samlor* ride from bus stop). ✆ **05365-0826.** Fax 05365-0830. 60 units. 1,200B double. No credit cards. Rates include complimentary breakfast. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

15

Exploring Isan: Thailand's Frontier

The 19 provinces of northeastern Thailand are collectively called Isan (*e-sahn*) and account for roughly one-third of the country's landmass, and a third of the population. Bordered by Laos to the north and east (along the Mekong) and by Cambodia to the south, the region suffers from a stagnant rural economy. Life is hard on the scorched plains of Isan, but the friendly people of this region welcome travelers warmly—you'll experience something along the lines of America's southern hospitality. There are a few tourist attractions, mostly off the beaten track, including some important archaeological sites (mostly dating from the Khmer period), lovely river towns, finely made crafts, and fiery food. The areas in the far north and along the Mekong are particularly worth the trip.

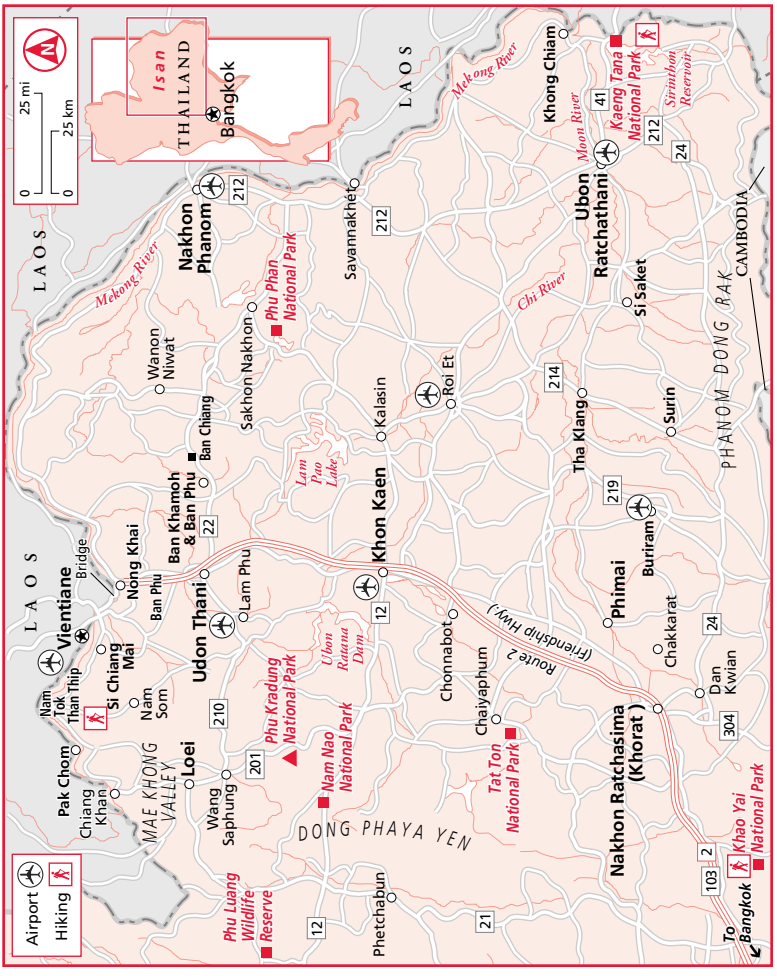
The weather is especially hot in Isan but follows a pattern much like the rest of Thailand: It's coolest from November to February; hot and dry from March to May; and rainy from June to October. Windswept and infertile in parts, but verdant along the Mekong, the region is attracting more international tourists who come for the trekking options, but also because Isan is a good jumping-off point for trips to Laos.

Indeed, much about Isan, from the weather to the local dialect and culture, resembles Laos and is quite distinct from mainstream Thai culture. As a result, many joke about *Prathet Isan,* or "the Nation of Isan," for its unique language, culture, and stubbornly snail-like pace. As the poorest region of Thailand, with little opportunity for its young populace, Isan is experiencing an ever-increasing drain on people as young folks move to the area's larger cities. A few learned phrases of the Isan dialect will endear you to a large part of the Bangkok cab driver population, for example. You are sure to meet kind folks from Isan in every region of Thailand, and the fact that you know the name of their town, much less have been there, will be a source of wonder.

1 INFORMATION & TOURS

A few **Thai Airways** (✆ **02356-1111;** www.thaiair.com) and **PB Air** (✆ **02326-8000;** www.pbair.com) flights are available to these parts, and there are regular bus and train connections throughout Isan. In more remote parts, buses are slow and won't stop near sights, so try to arrange a tour, or go by your own rented vehicle with a driver. The latter is a relatively affordable proposition; expect to pay about 2,000B per day, plus fuel. Contact **Isan Discovery Travel** in Khon Kaen (311/15 Klang Muang Rd., 3rd Floor, Room 305, Khon Kaen 40000; ✆ **04332-1268;** fax 04322-5196; www.thaitraveldreams.com), a small, expat-owned tour company; they can arrange a private itinerary covering the region.

There are **Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT)** offices in bigger towns in the region (though few are conveniently located). Check out www.tourismthailand.org, or call ✆ **1672** for assistance.



2 NAKHON RATCHASIMA (KHORAT)

259km (161 miles) NE of Bangkok; 150km (93 miles) W of Buriram; 305km (190 miles) S of Udon Thani

Nakhon Ratchasima, popularly known as Khorat, isn't a wildly interesting city, but it is close to Bangkok and makes a good base for excursions to beautiful **Khao Yai National Park** (see "Side Trips from Bangkok," in chapter 7) and the temple at **Phimai.** It is a rapidly developing industrial city and is called the "Gateway to Isan" because all train lines, bus routes, roads, and communications pass through it. There are some comfortable accommodations in Khorat and a few temples and city monuments worth seeing.

 The city also gives its name to the Khorat Plateau, which occupies most of Isan. The plateau is made of sandstone, which accounts for the region's lack of fertility, and stands about 200m (656 ft.) above sea level.

GETTING THERE

The airport in Khorat is no longer operational, but there are numerous daily trains from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **1690**), and frequent bus connections from Bangkok's Northern Bus Terminal, **Mo Chit** (✆ **02936-2841**). It's about a 3-hour journey by train or bus.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

A trip to **Phimai,** 60km (37 miles) northeast of town, is highly recommended to appreciate the wonders of Khmer archaeology, particularly if you have not visited Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. **Prasat Hin Phimai** ★★ temple complex (daily 7:30am–6pm; 100B) has been beautifully restored by the Fine Arts Department, and there is a large museum on-site as well. In Khorat, the most interesting temple houses a sandstone image of Phra Narai (Vishnu), a sacred Hindu deity, at **Wat Phra Narai Maharat** (daily 8am–8pm), along Prajak Road, where you'll also find the **City Pillar.**

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

The best hotel in town is the **Dusit Princess Khorat** (1137 Suranarai Rd., northeast of town near the stadium; ✆ **04425-6629;** www.dusit.com), with fair amenities and rooms starting from 1,500B. A close second is **Sima Thani** (2112 Mittraphap Rd., next to the TAT office, west of town; ✆ **04421-3100;** www.simathani.com), with similar rates. **Chomsurang Hotel** (2701/1–2 Mahatthai Rd., near the Night Market; ✆ **04425-7088**) has basic rooms from 600B.

When it comes to dining, you can't do better than head for the reliable **Cabbages & Condoms** (86/1 Seub Siri Rd.; ✆ **04425-3760**), a branch of the Population & Community Development Association–run chain that is located just west of the train station. With a shady terrace, an extensive menu of such Thai classics as *tom kha kai* (chicken in coconut soup), and a decent wine list, it's an ideal spot to while away a lazy evening. If you're hankering for Western food, head for **Chez Andy** (5–7 Manat Rd.; ✆ **04428-9556**) in the southwest corner of the Old City, where you can order up a steak or fondue.

3 KHON KAEN

449km (279 miles) NE of Bangkok; 190km (118 miles) N of Nakhon Ratchasima; 115km (71 miles) S of Udon Thani

For most travelers, Khon Kaen is just a stopover en route to Udon and Nong Khai. The town is along Route 2, connects by rail with Bangkok and Nong Khai, and has a large commercial airport.

GETTING THERE

Thai Airways (✆ **02356-1111;** www.thaiairways.com) has several flights a day from Bangkok. There are also three trains running daily from Bangkok, and bus services abound.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The town's most striking monument is the nine-tiered **Wat Nongwan Muang Kao,** located at the southern end of Klang Muang Road. Supposedly inspired by the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar, its white, red, and gold coat glows in the early-morning and late-afternoon sun, making it great for photos. Conveniently located to the east of the temple is **Beung Kaen Nakhon,** a large lake that attracts walkers, joggers, and cyclists to its perimeter path (bikes can be rented for 20B) in the mornings and evenings, and diners to eat at restaurants overlooking the water. **Bua Luang,** situated at the northern end of the lake, is a good choice (see below).

Recently, the town has become a kind of "Dinosaur City," with models of these creatures everywhere. This is due to the discovery in 1996 of a small (6m-long/20-ft.) fossil of a 120-million-year-old dinosaur at **Phuwiang,** about 90km (56 miles) northwest of Khon Kaen. Phuwiang has now been protected as a national park, but, in truth, there is little to see there apart from a few dusty old bones.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

You'll find many accommodations options in Khon Kaen, as it's a busy regional convention center. The top choice is the **Pullman Khon Kaen Raja Orchid** (9/9 Prachasamran Rd.; ✆ **04332-2155;** www.pullmanhotels.com), with stylish rooms from 2,500B. Or try the **Charoen Thani Princess** (Srichan and Na-Muang roads; ✆ **04322-0400;** www.dusit.com), a popular meeting and convention address with doubles from 1,300B. On a smaller scale, the **Bussaracam** (68 Pimpasut Rd.; ✆ **04333-3666;** www.bussarakamhotel.com) has clean and comfortable rooms from 900B.

Because eating options in Thailand always increase in relation to the population, Khon Kaen has plenty of places for the culinary curious to explore. **Bua Luang,** at the north end of Beung Kaen Nakhon Lake, has an extensive menu with lots of seafood and generally efficient service, and is a favorite spot for locals to take guests for a feast. Nearer the center of town, **Didine,** on Prachasamran Road (near the train station), serves some imaginative Western dishes, such as chicken with tarragon sauce, as well as several Thai favorites; there's also a good selection of drinks and a pool table. Isan is famous for its **marinated grilled chicken,** so if you pass a roadside stall giving off a smoky, appealing aroma, don't hesitate to stop and buy a sample.

4 UDON THANI & BAN CHIANG

564km (350 miles) NE of Bangkok; 305km (190 miles) N of Nakhon Ratchasima

"No sweat, man," was once a common saying among tuk-tuk drivers here. The use of 1960s slang reminds tourists that Udon Thani (or Udon) was home to a large contingent of U.S. armed forces during the Vietnam War and memories of that time still linger. Today you might see a few retired U.S. servicemen around, and each year the area welcomes a contingent of the U.S. military for joint training with Thai forces (mostly the Air Force).

Udon itself has few attractions, but it is a good jumping-off point to such small towns as Loei, to the west (p. 375), and Ban Chiang, a well-known archaeological site, to the east.

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

Thai Airways (✆ **02356-1111;** www.thaiair.com) offers daily flights to the area, as do budget carriers **Nok Air** (✆ **1318;** www.nokair.com) and **Air Asia** (✆ **02515-9999;** www.airasia.com). Numerous trains (best as an overnight in a second-class sleeper) connect from Bangkok's **Hua Lamphong Station** (✆ **1690**) daily via Khon Kaen; and there are bus connections from Udon to anywhere in the region. ***Note:*** **Budget Car Rental** has an office at the airport (✆ **04224-6805**). It is a good idea to fly to Udon and rent a car here to explore the Mekong Valley to the north (see the following sections).

The hub of this town is the **Charoensri Shopping Complex,** around which you'll find many services. With a population of around 200,000, Udon is quite sprawling, so the best way to get around is by tuk-tuks, which, oddly, are called "skylabs" here.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

BAN CHIANG NATIONAL MUSEUM ★ The tiny hamlet of Ban Chiang, approximately 50km (31 miles) east of Udon on the Sakon Nakhon highway, boasts a history of more than 5,600 years, and, as such, the area was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992. It was—quite literally—stumbled upon in 1974 and, since then, has been excavated by an international team. The findings at Ban Chiang prove the existence of a distinct and very sophisticated Bronze Age culture in Southeast Asia, long before any earlier findings. The museum was funded by the Kennedy Foundation and houses a fine collection of early statuary as well as pottery and ritual implements. The site is open Wednesday to Sunday from 9am to 4pm; admission is 100B. Ban Chiang is close to the main highway between Udon and Nakhon Phanom. It's best visited by private vehicle, but you can also ask local buses to stop at the Ban Chiang junction and take a tuk-tuk to the site. Along the main road to the site, look for the many villages producing replica Ban Chiang ceramic ware, with its distinctive spiral design.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

The **Centara Hotel** (277/1 Prachak Silpakorn Rd., west of the railway station and adjacent to the mall; ✆ **04234-3555;** www.centarahotelsresorts.com), formerly the Charoen Sri Grand Hotel, is the best choice in town, with cozy rooms that are centrally located, from 1,500B. **Charoen Hotel** (549 Phosri Rd., near the train station; ✆ **04224-8155;** www.udonthani.com/charoen) has basic rooms from 1,000B.

For a range of choice, the best bet for eating in the evening is at the **Night Market,** on Prajak Road, just west of the train station. If you prefer something more relaxed and romantic, try **Rabiang Patchani,** on Suphakit Janya Road, on the east side of a lake

The Mekong Valley Loop

This loop takes you from **Udon,** to the west, and the little town of **Loei,** then along the Mekong, the natural Thai–Laos border, through **Nong Khai,** and on to **Nakhon Phanom.** With a side trip to **That Phanom** (and a possible stop at Ban Chiang), you return to Udon, from where you can fly back to Bangkok. You could also amend the route to follow the Mekong all the way south from Nakhon Phanom to **Ubon Ratchathani.** This is adventurous off-the-track travel, and it's not a bad idea to hire a car and driver (see "Information & Tours," at the beginning of this chapter).

called Nong Prajak. The menu here features an extensive range of unusual Isan dishes, and diners can choose between an air-conditioned interior and a breezy deck.

5 LOEI

520km (323 miles) NE of Bangkok; 344km (214 miles) N of Nakhon Ratchasima

Cool and usually rainy because of its higher elevation (the town is reputedly the coldest spot in the kingdom), little Loei is a lazy riverside town worth an overnight stop, but this route is more about the beautiful road journey, not the destination. Dan Sai, 80km (50 miles) southwest of Loei, hosts the annual **Pi Tha Khon Festival** (June/July), a Thai-style Mardi Gras in which young men dress as spirits and go crazy in the streets. "The devil made me do it!" is the excuse for all kinds of outlandish behavior; it's lots of fun. South of Loei town is **Phu Kradung National Park** (admission 400B adults, 200B children), one of Thailand's most dramatic sights: a bell-shaped tabletop mountain of 1,300m (4,265ft.) that can be climbed in around 3 to 4 hours (porters can be hired to carry bags) and has appealing log-cabin huts (900B–3,600B double) for visitors to stay on the summit. The park is 82km (51 miles) from Loei and well worth the trip, especially in December and January when the scarlet maple leaves are falling, though it's closed during the rainy season (June–Sept).

GETTING THERE

There is neither a train line nor an airport in Loei, but regular buses connect the town with Udon Thani and Khon Kaen. See p. 372 for information.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Loei Palace Hotel (167/4 Charoenrat Rd.; ✆ **04281-5668;** www.amari.com) is by far the best choice in town; it's a huge courtyard hotel with lots of amenities, including a pool and affordable rooms (from 1,200B per double). **King's Hotel** (11/9–12 Chumsai Rd., at town center; ✆ **04281-1701**) is a basic, affordable choice with rooms from 500B.

A good restaurant is **Ban Thai** (✆ **04283-3472**) on Nok Kaew Road. Because it can satisfy a craving for Western food with steaks, pizzas, good beer, and coffee, but also turns out a good range of tasty Thai dishes, it's ideal for a group of diners with different tastes.

6 ALONG THE MEKONG FROM LOEI TO NONG KHAI

One of the most scenic areas in Thailand—and delightfully secluded—the northwestern perimeter of Isan runs along the wide Mekong River, which forms the border with Laos. The terrain is relatively flat, the road is only lightly trafficked and in a good state of repair, and you can stop at a number of villages.

The loop begins in Loei and ends in Nong Khai. Directly north of Loei, you'll reach the riverside town of **Chiang Khan,** where you'll find a few riverside guesthouses, a *wat* worth visiting **(Wat Si Khun Muang),** and a few expatriates who've discovered the real simple life. You can take a trip to the rapids at **Kaeng Kut Khu** by longtail boat for around 1,000B for a couple of hours (contact any riverside guesthouse).

From Chiang Khan, Route 212 follows the Mekong east to **Pak Chom** and **Si Chiang Mai** before arriving in Nong Khai. Buses and *songtaews* make all of these connections, but taking those is a hassle, so it's best to have your own transport. The route passes lush banana plantations, terraced fruit farms, and wonderful river views. Cotton and tomato fields fan out along the verdant flood plains of the Mekong basin. Farther inland are lovely waterfalls, such as **Than Thip** (between Pak Chom and Si Chiang Mai), which are fun for hiking and ideal for picnics.

Don't miss the unique gold tower of the **Prasutham Chedi,** just west of Si Chiang Mai, along the main road, and **Wat Hin Mak Peng,** which is some 30km (19 miles) west of Si Chiang Mai and a glorious temple site overlooking the Mekong.

Si Chiang Mai is opposite Vientiane, the Laos capital, and is but 58km (36 miles) due west of Nong Khai. The town is just a quiet Thai backwater. Walks along the long concrete pier or relaxing and watching Laos and Thai longtail boats load and unload or chug up- and downriver is about all that's going on here. In the evenings, join in a game of badminton or a circle of people juggling a *takraw* (a small rattan ball). There are lots of little open-air eateries at the riverside and a few small guesthouses along the quay at town center: Try **Maneerat Resort** (74 Rimkong Rd., along the eastern end of the quay; ✆ **04245-1311**), with basic but clean air-conditioned rooms starting at 400B, and a friendly and helpful staff.

7 NONG KHAI

615km (382 miles) NE of Bangkok; 51km (32 miles) N of Udon Thani

The little border town of Nong Khai is nothing special but its sprawling riverside market **Tha Sadet** is full of interesting goods from Laos and China, and the place has a palpable calm with some good, laid-back riverside guesthouses. Nong Khai is a popular jumping-off point for travel to Laos.

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is in Udon Thani (p. 373), but Nong Khai is the terminus of the Northeast train line from Bangkok and is an enjoyable, if rocky, overnight journey. Regular buses connect with points throughout the region, too.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Tha Sadet, or the **Indochina Market** (daily 8am–6pm), located at the heart of town at riverside, is the main attraction in Nong Khai and it is certainly worth a wander. Also check out **Sala Kaew Ku Sculpture Park** ★ (about 4km/2½ miles east of town, on Rte. 212), where you'll find concrete Buddhas, Hindu deities, and other fantastic statues of enormous proportions in an attractive garden setting—all the brainchild of the eccentric Mr. Luang Phu Boonlua Surirat. He studied with an Indian guru in Vietnam and later taught in Laos, and his mummified body can be viewed on a tour of the main temple building (he also built a similar sculpture garden just across the river near Vientiane, Laos). Entry is 20B, and the site is open daily from 8am to 6pm.

Good day trips from Nong Khai include a day (or overnight) across the border to **Vientiane** (visas are available at the border), or head out to **Phu Phrabat Historical Park,** some 70km/43 miles southwest of Nong Khai; the site is a unique grouping of natural sandstone towers that were fashioned into rudimentary cave dwellings.

Goodness Gracious! Great Balls of . . . Fire?

In October, when the moon is full, heralding the end of the Buddhist Lent, a ghostly phenomenon occurs that is, as yet, unexplained. From the waters of the Mekong rise glowing balls of red fire that ascend high into the night sky. This mystical event attracts thousands from all over Thailand. The explanation? Some say it is the rising *Naga,* or river dragon, coming to greet Lord Buddha. On the other hand, scientists claim it is bubbles of gas originating from rotting organic matter in the riverbed being released into the air. Whether believer or nonbeliever, superstitious Thais love to flock to the venue, and hotels are usually full this time of year. Be warned, however, that the spectacle is not guaranteed; when I visited, there were no fireballs to be seen. ***Note:*** There is little or no public transport available on these nights, so you'll need your own transport, and be prepared for traffic jams along the riverside road.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Budget accommodations line the small streets all over town. **Mutmee Guesthouse** (111/4 Kaeworawut Rd.; ✆ **04246-0717;** www.mutmee.com) is foreign-run, and a comfortable budget choice (from 100B for dorm beds; from 170B per double) . It's also a great place to get good local info (and great food), and they can try to help with transport options on Naga Fireball nights. The best hotel in Nong Khai is the **Nong Khai Grand Hotel** (589 Moo 5, Nong Khai–Poanpisai Rd., just south of town; ✆ **04242-0033;** www.nongkhaigrand.com), with comfortable air-conditioned rooms from 1,250B.

For good local dining, try **Daeng Namnuang** (on a small side street just off the central market; ✆ **04241-1961**), serving a popular do-it-yourself Vietnamese pork spring roll. Alternatively, stop by **Udomros** (✆ **04242-1084**), which serves real Thai food in the heart of the market area overlooking the Mekong.

8 NAKHON PHANOM

740km (460 miles) NE of Bangkok; 252km (157 miles) E of Udon Thani; 481km (299 miles) NE of Nakhon Ratchasima

Travelers rarely make it out to these parts of Thailand; apart from a few good riverside hotels catering to Westerners, the place is pretty quiet. That's the allure. Walk riverside streets and look for the old Vietnamese clock tower—a gift from grateful Vietnamese Catholic refugees escaping Ho Chi Minh's Communists in North Vietnam. South of town is **That Phanom,** an important pilgrimage site for Thai Buddhists; from there, pass through Sakon Nakhon to return to Udon Thani (with a possible side trip to Ban Chiang) completing the loop. Many travelers follow the Mekong south from Nakhon Phanom all the way to Ubon Ratchathani, where they can catch a train back to Bangkok. Each year, Nakhon Phanom hosts the famed "Lai Rua Fai," or **Fire Boat Festival,** where barges float downstream, twinkling with small candles in the night (also dragon boat races by day), all to celebrate the end of the rains in October.

Southeast Isan

Branching off on the eastern spur of the rail line at Khorat as you head north and east of Bangkok, you trace the edge of the Cambodian border on your way to Laos. First reach **Buriram,** a town with a few notable hilltop Khmer ruins, and then **Surin** (see below), an area famous for raising elephants, before reaching **Ubon Ratchathani.** There are few jaw-dropping sites—and few Western tourists—in this city.

GETTING THERE

PB Air (✆ **02326-8000;** www.pbair.com) has daily flights to Bangkok; otherwise, you'll arrive by road from Sakon Nakhon, or via the Mekong from Nong Khai.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The city's *wats* are built in a distinctive style, and the exterior bas-reliefs, attributed to the Laotian Lan Xang kingdom, are said to date back some 300 years. An hour to the south, **Wat That Phanom** is a temple built around a tall 9th-century stupa that collapsed in 1975 and was rebuilt in 1978. It's an important pilgrimage site for Thai Buddhists and makes for a pleasant trip. The 53m-tall (174 ft.) stupa itself is built in Laos style, with its tapering, curved sides decorated with gold patterns on a white background and topped off with a gold umbrella. There's always a reverential aura around the place, particularly at the annual **That Phanom Festival,** usually in February, when it is crowded with pilgrims, both Thai and Lao, for 10 days.

WHERE TO STAY

The Viewkong Hotel (527 Soonthornvijitra Rd.; ✆ **04251-3564;** www.viewkonghotel.com) has tidy rooms, stacked right over the Mekong, starting at 1,500B.

9 SURIN

457km (284 miles) NE of Bangkok; 227km (141 miles) W of Ubon Ratchathani

Surin is elephant country and is justly famed for it is annual roundup (in Nov), a nearly 200-year tradition; the city is also a good base for exploring far-flung Khmer ruins.

GETTING THERE

Ten trains connect daily from Bangkok via the spur line from Khorat (about 8½ hr.), and there are numerous buses; see p. 76 in chapter 5, "Introducing Bangkok," for details.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

If you haven't come with your own guide, the best way to visit the sporadically scattered sites around Surin is to book a tour with friendly Mr. Pirom at the **Pirom Guest House** (✆ **04451-5140**). Mr. Pirom has been in the business for years and guiding is just an extension of his passion for the ancient history and culture of this rural region. The most popular tours are to the many secluded Khmer temples in the area, and he combines such visits with stops at elephant-training villages, Khmer cultural sites, handicraft villages,

Ubon Ratchathani

Tucked away between Thailand's borders with Cambodia and Laos, **Ubon Ratchathani** is one of Isan's largest urban centers with over 100,000 inhabitants. There is little to detain travelers in the town itself apart from a massive statue of a votive candle in **Thung Si Muang Park,** though it is a good base for trips to nearby national parks. The statue is a reference to the town's unusual annual **Candle Festival,** which takes place in July, when huge wax carvings are paraded round the town's streets.

Located a short stroll west of the town center, the **Tohsang City Hotel** (✆ **04524-5531;** www.tohsang.com) provides a stylish spot to rest your head, with rooms starting at around 2,000B. For a more rural experience, go for the **Tohsang Khongjiam Resort** (✆ **04535-1174;** www.tohsang.com), which is situated on the banks of the Khong Chiam River, near the border with Laos, about 75 km/46 miles northeast of Ubon Ratchathani. Rates here are a little higher than at the City Hotel, but the picturesque views along the river make it worth it. Nearby are the national parks of **Pha Taem** (admission 200B adults, 100B children), which has some ancient rock paintings on a cliff overlooking the Mekong River, and **Kaeng Tana** (admission 100B adults, 50B children), where the attractions are waterfalls, caves, and unusual rock formations.

and even trips to the weekend market at the Cambodian border. Expect to pay from 1,000B per person.

The **elephant roundup** ★ that takes place on the third weekend of November each year is one of Thailand's best-known festivals, so it attracts many Thais as well as foreign visitors. As a result, accommodation must be booked well in advance. Over the course of the weekend, the elephants parade in battle gear, play games of football, and test their strength with a tug of war. Don't miss the morning parade when locals lay out a spread for the pachyderms as they stroll through town. Tickets cost from 500B to 800B and can be reserved through the Tourist Authority of Thailand (www.tourismthailand.org).

OUTSIDE OF SURIN

Buriram is about halfway between Surin and Khorat, and easily reached overland or by **PB Air**'s (✆ **02326-8000;** www.pbair.com) three weekly flights from the capital. It's the best base to visit **Phanom Rung** ★★ (daily 6am–6pm; admission 100B), a stunning Khmer ruin which was deserted in the late 13th century, rediscovered in 1935, and restored in the 1970s. This Khmer temple was built during the 11th century, and stands in a direct line between Angkor in Cambodia and Pimai, a little farther northwest. Like Pimai, it has benefited from a loving restoration by the Fine Arts Department, and is in some ways even more impressive than Pimai with its hilltop location and intricate carvings on the main *prang* (central tower). It's worth stopping by the **visitor center** (9am–4:30pm) to get an overview of the temple's most significant aspects.

An additional popular side trip from Surin is **Khao Phra Viharn,** another striking Khmer temple site, on the Cambodian border, with some wonderful lintel carvings,

though not restored as meticulously as Pimai or Phanom Rung. However, at the time of this update, it was closed to the public due to a border dispute, so check locally whether it has reopened before setting out on the long journey. When it is open, it costs around 400B to get in—200B each for the Thai and Cambodian authorities.

WHERE TO STAY

Thong Tarin Hotel (60 Sirirat Rd., just east of the bus station and town center; ✆ **04451-4281;** www.thongtarinhotel.com) is the best in town, with tidy rooms from 1,000B. Nearby **Petchkasem Hotel** (104 Chitbumrung Rd., in the town center; ✆ **04451-1274**) is a basic business hotel, with rooms from just 600B. **Pirom Guesthouse** (SoiArunee, Thungpo Rd., 1km/⅔ mile west of the station; ✆ **04451-5140**) is a very rustic but authentic guesthouse with rooms starting at 200B—you will feel as though you're a special guest of owners Mr. and Mrs. Pirom when you stay here.

16

Fast Facts

1 FAST FACTS: THAILAND

AMERICAN EXPRESS There is an office at S.P. Building, 388, Pahonyothin Rd., in Bangkok. You can reach the office at ✆ **02273-0033;** it's open Monday to Friday 8:30am to 5pm. More Thai hot lines can be found at www.americanexpress.com, but these will be geared to help Thai card members, so check on the back of your card for your own country's relevant help lines.

AREA CODES See "Staying Connected," on p. 57, for information on area codes.

ATM NETWORKS Most major banks throughout the country have ATMs. In general, you can get cash with your debit card at any Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmers' Bank, or Siam Commercial Bank—provided your card is hooked into the MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/PLUS network. See the "Money & Costs" section, in chapter 3, for more info.

BUSINESS HOURS Government offices (including branch post offices) are open Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm, with a lunch break between noon and 1pm. Businesses are generally open 8am to 5pm. Shops often stay open from 8am until 7pm or later, 7 days a week. Department stores are generally open 10am to 8pm. Most TAT visitor centers are open daily from 8:30am to 4pm.

CAR RENTALS See "Getting Around Thailand," on p. 39.

DRINKING LAWS The official drinking age in Thailand is 18. You can readily buy and drink alcohol, even in supermarkets, but licensing laws apply, and legally drinks can be served only after 5pm. On some public holidays and election days, no liquor can be sold at all. Most restaurants, bars, and nightclubs sell booze, and you can pick up bottles of imported and local liquor from convenience stores. Nightspots must close at 1am (and the rule is being policed vigorously). Alcohol, hitherto readily sold over the counter anywhere, anytime, is now subject to strict licensing hours.

DRIVING RULES See "Getting Around," in chapter 3.

DRUGSTORES Throughout the country, there are many drugstores stocked with brand-name medications and toiletries, plus less expensive local brands. Pharmacists often speak some English, and a number of drugs that require a prescription elsewhere can be dispensed over the counter.

ELECTRICITY All outlets—except in some luxury hotels—are 220 volts AC (50 cycles). Outlets have two flat-pronged or round-pronged holes, so you may need an adapter. If you use a 110-volt hair dryer, electric shaver, or battery charger for a computer, bring a transformer and an adapter.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES While most countries have consular representation in Bangkok, the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom also have consulates in Chiang Mai. See chapters 5 and 13 for details. Most embassies have 24-hour emergency services. If you are seriously injured or ill, call your embassy for assistance.

In the **United States,** contact the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 1024 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Ste. 401, Washington, DC 20007 (✆ **202/944-3600;** fax 202/944-3611; www.thaiembdc.org); **The Permanent Mission of Thailand** to the United Nations, 351 E. 52nd St., New York, NY 10022 (✆ **212/754-2230;** fax 212/688/3029); the **Royal Thai Consulate-General,** 611 N. Larchmont Blvd., 2nd Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90004 (✆ **323/962-9574;** fax 323/962-2128; www.thai-la.net); the **Royal Thai Consulate-General,** 700 N. Rush St., Chicago, IL 60611-2504 (✆ **312/664-3129;** fax 312/664-3230; www.thaichicago.net); or the **Royal Thai Consulate-General,** 351 E. 52nd St., New York, NY 10022 (✆ **212/754-1770;** fax 212/754-1907; www.thaiconsulnewyork.com).

In **Canada,** contact the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 180 Island Park Dr., Ottawa, Ontario K1Y OA2 (✆ **613/722-4444;** fax 613/722-6624; www.magma.ca/~thaiott/mainpage.htm); or the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 1040 Burrard St., Vancouver, BC V6Z 2R9 (✆ **604/687-1143;** fax 604/687-4434; www.thaicongenvancouver.org).

In **Australia,** contact the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 111 Empire Circuit Yarralumla, Canberra ACT 2600 (✆ **02/6206-0100;** fax 02/6206-0123; http://canberra.thaiembassy.org); or the **Royal Thai Consulate-General,** Level 8, 131 Macquarie St. Sydney, NSW 2000 (✆ **02/9241-2542;** fax 02/9241-2543; www.thaiconsulatesydney.org).

In **New Zealand,** contact the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 2 Cook St., Karori, P.O. Box 17226, Wellington (✆ **644/476-8618;** fax 644/476-3677; www.thaiembassynz.org.nz).

In the **United Kingdom,** contact the **Royal Thai Embassy,** 29–30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB (✆ **020/7589-2944;** fax 020/7823-7492; www.thaiembassyuk.org.uk).

EMERGENCIES Throughout the country, the emergency number you should use is ✆ **1699** or 1155 for the Tourist Police. Don't expect many English speakers at police posts outside the major tourist areas. Ambulances must be summoned from hospitals rather than through a central service (see hospital listings in each city). You can also contact your embassy or consulate.

INSURANCE For information on traveler's insurance, trip cancellation insurance, and medical insurance while traveling, please visit www.frommers.com/planning.

INTERNET ACCESS You'll find Internet cafes everywhere in Thailand. See the "Fast Facts" sections in specific destination chapters for details, as well as "Staying Connected," in chapter 3.

LANGUAGE Central (often called Bangkok) Thai is the official language. English is spoken in the major cities at hotels, some restaurants, and a few smart shops, and is the second language of the professional class. (For more information on the Thai language, see chapter 17.)

LOST & FOUND To report a lost or stolen credit card in Thailand, the following companies' services are available: **American Express** (✆ **02273-5544**); **Diners Club** (✆ **02238-3660**); **Mastercard** (✆ **02260-8572**); and **Visa** (✆ **02273-1199**).

MAIL You can pick up mail while you travel by using a poste restante, which is simply a counter at a post office where your mail is kept for you until you pick it up; normally, 2 months is the maximum hold time. For those unfamiliar with this service, it is comparable to General Delivery in the United States. Mail is addressed to you, care of Poste Restante, GPO, Name of City. You'll need proof of ID, and must sign a receipt and pay 1B per letter received. Hours of operation are the same as those of the post office. (See individual chapters for local post offices and their hours.)

Airmail postcards to the United States usually cost 15B, but rates depend on the size of the card; airmail letters cost 19B per

5 grams (rates to Europe are the same). Airmail delivery usually takes 7 to 20 days.

Air parcel post costs 610B per kilogram. Surface or sea parcel post costs 215B for 1 kilogram (3 or 4 months for delivery). International Express Mail (EMS) costs 440B from 1 to 250 grams, with delivery guaranteed within 7 days.

Shipping by air freight is quite costly, but most major international delivery services have offices in Bangkok and a network that extends to the provinces. These are **DHL Thailand,** Grand Amarin Tower Building, Phetchaburi Road (✆ **02207-0600**), and **Federal Express,** at Rama IV Road (✆ **1782**). **UPS Parcel Delivery Service** has a main branch in Bangkok at 16/1 Sukhumvit Soi 44/1 (✆ **02712-3300**). Many businesses will also package and mail merchandise for a reasonable price.

NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES The English-language dailies are Bangkok Post and The Nation, distributed in the morning in the capital and later in the day around the country. They cover the domestic political scene, as well as international news from Associated Press and Reuters wire services, and cost 25B. Both the Asian Wall Street Journal and International Herald Tribune are available Monday to Friday on their day of publication in Bangkok (in the provinces, it may be a day later). Time, Newsweek, and The Economist are sold in international hotels, as well as in a few of the major cities.

PASSPORTS For **Residents of the United States:** Whether you're applying in person or by mail, you can download passport applications from the U.S. Department of State website at http://travel.state.gov. For general information, call the **National Passport Agency** (✆ **202/647-0518**). To find your regional passport office, either check the U.S. Department of State website or call the **National Passport Information Center** (✆ **900/225-5674**); the fee is 55¢ per minute for automated information and $1.50 per minute for operator-assisted calls.

For Residents of Canada: Passport applications are available at travel agencies throughout Canada or from the central **Passport Office,** Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, ON K1A 0G3 (✆ **800/567-6868;** www.ppt.gc.ca).

For Residents of the United Kingdom: To pick up an application for a standard 10-year passport (5-year passport for children 15 and younger), visit your nearest passport office, major post office, or travel agency. Also contact the **United Kingdom Passport Service** at ✆ **0870/521-0410,** or search its website at www.ukpa.gov.uk, for info.

For Residents of Ireland: You can apply for a 10-year passport at the **Passport Office,** Setanta Centre, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 (✆ **01/671-1633;** www.irlgov.ie/iveagh). Those under age 18 and over 65 must apply for a €12, 3-year passport. You can also apply at 1A South Mall, Cork (✆ **021/272-525**), or at most main post offices.

For Residents of Australia: You can pick up an application from your local post office or any branch of Passports Australia, but you must schedule an interview at the passport office to present your application materials. Call the **Australian Passport Information Service** at ✆ **13-12-32,** or visit the government website at www.passports.gov.au.

For Residents of New Zealand: You can pick up a passport application at any New Zealand Passports Office or download it from their website. Contact the **Passports Office,** at ✆ **0800/225-050** in New Zealand, or 04/474-8100; or log on to www.passports.govt.nz.

POLICE The **Tourist Police** (✆ **1699** or 1155), with offices in every city (see specific chapters), speak English (and other foreign languages) and are open 24 hours. You should call them in an emergency rather than the regular police because

there is no guarantee that police operators will speak English.

RESTROOMS The country's better restaurants and hotels will have Western toilets. Shops and budget hotels will have an Asian squat toilet, a ceramic platform mounted over a hole in the ground. Near the toilet is a water bucket or sink with a small ladle. The water is for flushing the toilet. Toilet paper is not provided, but some have tissue dispensers outside the restroom costing 5B. Dispose of it in the wastebasket provided, as it will clog up rudimentary sewage systems.

SMOKING Over 5 years ago, Thailand banned smoking in public places, such as restaurants and airports. Some bars that don't serve food can get away with smokers, or have created smoker-friendly outdoor spaces, including upmarket private cigar bars. If in doubt, ask about nonsmoking sections. A few years ago, the former Prime Minister Thaksin prohibited the display of cigarettes anywhere. They are still sold but cannot appear on shelves—you'll have to ask.

TAXES & SERVICE CHARGES Hotels charge a 7% government value-added tax (VAT) and typically add a 10% service charge; hotel restaurants add 8.25% government tax. Smaller hotels quote the price inclusive of these charges.

TIME ZONE Thailand is 7 hours ahead of GMT (Greenwich Mean Time). During winter months, this means that Bangkok is 7 hours ahead of London, 12 hours ahead of New York, and 15 hours ahead of Los Angeles. Daylight saving time will add 1 hour to these times.

TIPPING If no service charge is added to your check in a fine-dining establishment, a 10% to 15% tip is appropriate. In local shops, tipping is not common. Airport or hotel porters expect tips; 50B is acceptable. Feel free to reward good service wherever you find it. Tipping taxi drivers is appreciated. Carry small bills, as many cab drivers either don't have change or won't admit to having any in the hope of getting a tip.

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS The U.S. Department of State Travel Advisory can be called at ✆ **202/647-5225** (manned 24 hr.); the U.S. Passport Agency can be contacted at ✆ **202/647-0518;** and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control International Traveler's hot line is ✆ **404/332-4559.**

VISAS The **Immigration Division of the Royal Thai Police Department** is found at 507 Soi Suan Plu (off Sathorn Rd., and a short taxi ride from Lumphini BTS; ✆ **02287-3101-10**). Visitors planning to stay for longer than a month can arrange for 60-day tourist visas at embassies overseas for a cost of 1,000B; this is renewable in Thailand for an additional 30 days for another 1,900B. If you overstay your visa, you will be charged 500B per day, which is payable when exiting the kingdom. Longer overstays are punishable by anything up to a 20,000B fine or a stay in jail. For more information, check www.thaivisa.com, but bear in mind that it may not be completely up-to-date.

Warning: Until they were outlawed in 2006, small travel agencies offered "visa services," wherein you paid for a courier to take your passport to a border post to get a new visa stamp. A police crackdown has put a halt to this illegal practice. Also, foreigners who take advantage of the free 30-day visa-on-arrival service must remember that they may do this only three times in a row (allowing them a cumulative stay of a maximum of 90 days). After that they will not be allowed to enter Thailand until they pay for a new visa issued by a Royal Thai Embassy overseas.

VISITOR INFORMATION & MAPS Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) is an extensive site with information on locations throughout Thailand. However, its listings are often

incorrect or out-of-date. See the box "Online Traveler's Toolbox," on p. 58, for other options.

WATER Don't drink the tap water here, even in the major hotels. Most hotels provide bottled water; use it for brushing your teeth as well as drinking. Most restaurants serve bottled or boiled water and ice made from boiled water, but always ask to be sure. Purified water may not have the minerals you need to replace those lost in the heat and humidity, so check the label.

2 AIRLINE, HOTEL & CAR-RENTAL WEBSITES

MAJOR AIRLINES

Air Canada
www.aircanada.com

Air China
www.fly-airchina.com

Air France
www.airfrance.com

Air New Zealand
www.airnewzealand.com

American Airlines
www.aa.com

Bangkok Airways
www.bangkokair.com

British Airways
www.british-airways.com

Cathay Pacific
www.cathaypacific.com

China Airlines
www.china-airlines.com

Delta Airlines
www.delta.com

Emirates Airlines
www.emirates.com

Eva Air
www.evaair.com

Garuda Indonesia
www.garuda-indonesia.com

Gulf Air
www.gulfairco.com

Japan Airlines
www.jal.co.jp

Jetstar Airways
www.jetstar.com

KLM
www.klm.com

Korean Air
www.koreanair.com

Lao Airlines
www.laoairlines.com

Lufthansa
www.lufthansa.com

Malaysia Airlines
www.mas.com.my

Myanmar Airways
www.maiair.com

Qantas Airways
www.qantas.com

Philippine Airlines
www.philippineairlines.com

Royal Brunei Airlines
www.bruneiair.com

Royal Nepal Airlines
www.royalnepal-airlines.com

Scandinavian Airlines
www.scandinavian.net

Singapore Airlines
www.singaporeair.com

South African Airways
www.flysaa.com

Thai Airways International
www.thaiair.com

United Airlines
www.united.com

Vietnam Airlines
www.vietnamair.com.vn

BUDGET AIRLINES

Air Asia
www.airasia.com

Jetstar (Australia)
www.jetstar.com

Orient Thai
www.orient-thai.com

Silk Air
www.silkair.com

MAJOR HOTEL CHAINS

Accor
www.accorhotels.com

Amari
www.amari.com

Four Seasons
www.fourseasons.com

Hilton Hotels
www.hilton.com

Holiday Inn
www.holidayinn.com

Hyatt
www.hyatt.com

InterContinental Hotels & Resorts
www.ichotelsgroup.com

Mandarin Oriental
www.mandarinoriental.com

Marriott
www.marriott.com

Shangri La
www.shangri-la.com

Sheraton Hotels & Resorts
www.starwoodhotels.com/sheraton

Six Senses
www.sixsenses.com

Sofitel
www.sofitel.com

Westin Hotels & Resorts
www.starwoodhotels.com/westin

CAR-RENTAL AGENCIES

Avis
www.avis.com

Budget
www.budget.com

Hertz
www.hertz.com

National
www.nationalcar.com

17

A Little Bit of Thai to Help You Get By

Thai is a tonal language, with low, mid, high, rising, or falling tones. There are five tonal markings:

low tone: ˋ
falling tone: ˆ
middle tone (no marking)
rising tone: ˇ
high tone: ˊ

Most important, Thai also differentiates between the language used by a male and that used by a female. Thus, males use **Pôm** for I, and females use **Deè-chăn.** The suffix **khráp** is an affirmation used by men only, and **khâ** is used similarly for women. It can be used as a lazy reply, such as "Uh-huh."

Though it's very difficult for Westerners to pronounce Thai sounds correctly, there are no problems with stress, as all syllables receive equal emphasis. A useful resource for self-study of Thai is **www.thai-language.com**.

1 BASIC PHRASES & VOCABULARY

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
Hello (male)	**Sà–wàt–dii –khráp**	sah-wah-dee-kup
Hello (female)	**Sà-wàt-dii-khâ**	sah-wah-dee-kah
How are you?	**Sà bai-dii măi?**	sah-bye-dee-my
I am fine	**Sà bai-dii**	sah-bye-dee
Do you speak English?	**Phûut phaa-săa ang rìt dâi măi?**	poot pa-sah ang-krit dye my?
I do not understand	**Mâi khâo jai**	my cow jy
Excuse me/Sorry	**Khăw thôht (-khráp, -khâ)**	cor tort (-kup, -kah)
Thank you	**Khòp khun (-khráp, -khâ)**	cop koon (-kup, -kah)
No, I do not want . . .	**Mâi ao . . .**	my ow . . .
Yes, I want . . .	**Châi, ao. . .**	chai, ow . . .
Stop here!	**Yùt tîi nîi!**	Yut ti nee
Where is the (public) toilet?	**Hâwng nám yùu thîi năi?**	hong nam yutin nye?

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
I need to see a doctor	**Pôm/Deè-chăn tâwng kaan hăa măw**	pom/dee-charn tong-garn haa mor
Call the police!	**Rîak tam-rùat nàwy!**	reeyuk tamru-at noy
Never mind/No problem	**Mâi pen rai**	my pen rye
Do you have . . . ?	**Mii . . . măi?**	mee . . . my?

2 GETTING AROUND

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
I want to go to . . .	**Yàk jà pai . . .**	yark jar by . . .
Where is the . . .	**Yùu thîi năi . . .**	yutin nye . . .
taxi	**tháek-sîi**	tak-see
bus station	**sà thăa nee khôn sòng**	sartarnee kornsong
train station	**sà thăa nee rót fai**	sartarnee rot fye
airport	**sà năam bin**	sanam-bin
boat jetty	**thâ reua**	taa ru-er
hotel	**rohng ra-em**	rorngrem
hospital	**rohng phá yaa baan**	roong-pye-aban
How much . . . ?	**Thâo rai?**	tao-rye?
What time (does it depart)?	**(Jà àwk) kìi mohng?**	(jar ork) kee-mong?

3 IN A RESTAURANT

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
coffee	**kaa –fae**	gar-fay
tea (hot)	**chaa –ráwn**	char-rawn
bottled water	**nám khuàt**	nam kwat
water	**nám**	nam
ice	**nám khăeng**	nam keng
beer	**bia**	bee-ya
noodles	**kwăy tĭaw**	kway tee-ow
rice	**khâo**	cow
fried rice	**khâo phàt**	cow pat
chicken	**kài**	guy
beef	**neúa**	nuhr
pork	**mŭu**	moo
fish	**plaa**	blar
shrimp	**kûng**	goong

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
mango with sticky rice	**khâo nĭaw má mûang**	cow neeow mar-mwang
Thai desserts (general)	**khà nŏm**	knom
I am a vegetarian	**Kin a hăan jae**	gin aharn jae
I don't like it spicy	**Mâi châwp phèt**	my chorp pet
I like it spicy	**Châwp phèt**	chorp pet
Delicious!	**Àh-ròy!**	ah-roy
Check/bill please	**Khăw chék –bin**	gor chek-bin

4 SPECIFIC MENU TERMS

BASIC INGREDIENTS

bread khà nŏm pan
cake/biscuit khà nŏm
egg khài
salt kleua
sugar nám tan

COOKING METHODS

grilled pĭng
baked òb
barbecued yâng
boiled dôm
deep-fried tôrt
ground sĕe
roasted phăo
steamed nêung
stir-fried phàt

FRUITS

banana klûay
coconut máphráo
custard apple náwy nàa
durian thúrian
guava fà ràng
jackfruit khà nŭn
lime mánao
longan lam yài
mandarin orange sôm
mango mámûang
mangosteen mangkút
papaya málákaw
pineapple sàppàrót
pomelo sôm oh
rambutan ngáw
sapodilla lá mút
tamarind mákhăm
watermelon taeng moh

SEAFOOD

crab pu
lobster kûng yài
mussel hŏi maeng phû
oyster hŏi naang rom
prawn kûng fŏi
scallop hŏi shell
shellfish hŏi

VEGETABLES

bean sprouts thùa ngôk
cabbage phàk kà làm
cauliflower kà làm dàwk
corn khâo phôht
cucumber taeng kwa
eggplant mákhŏĕua mûang
garlic kràtiam
lettuce phàk kàat

long bean thùa fàk yao
mushroom hèt
scallions tôn hăwm
potato man fà ràng
spinach phàk khŏm
tomato mákhĕua thêt

5 GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS

bay ào
beach hàt
bridge sà phan
canal klong
cape lăem
city ná khon
district amphoe
hill khăo
island kò
lane soi
mountain doi
pier thâ
province changwàt
river mâe nám
street thà nŏn
town muang
village bân
waterfall nám tòk

6 DAYS OF THE WEEK & TIME

DAYS OF THE WEEK

Sunday wan aa thít
Monday wan jan
Tuesday wan ang kan
Wednesday wan poót
Thursday wan phá réu hàt
Friday wan sòok
Saturday wan são

TIME

What is the time? keè mohng láew?
Day wan
Month deuan
Year pee
Evening yen
Afternoon bai
Morning ton chaó
Now deeo née
This evening yen née
Today wan née
Tonight kern née
Tomorrow prûng née
Yesterday meûa wan née

7 SHOPPING

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
It's too expensive	**Phaeng kern pai**	peng kern pye
It's too big	**Yài kern pai**	yai kern pye
It's too small	**Lék kern pai**	lek kern pye
I don't like this one	**Mâi châwp an níi**	my chorp an nee
Do you have a (smaller/larger) size?	**Mii sai (lék /yài gwà) nîi măi?**	mee sai (lek/yai gwa) nee my?

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
Do you have a black one?	**Mii sĭi dam măi?**	mee see dam my?
Can you give me a better price?	**Lót raa kah dâi măi?**	lot ra ka dai my?
How much is this?	**Nêe taô rai?**	Nee tao ray
Do you have anything cheaper?	**Toòk gwà nêe mii măi?**	Tuk gwa nee me my?

8 NUMBERS

English	Thai Transliteration	Pronunciation
0	sŭun	soon
1	nèung	nung
2	săwng	song
3	săam	sam
4	sìi	see
5	hâa	hah
6	hòk	hork
7	jèd	jet
8	pàet	bet
9	kâo	gao
10	sìp	sip
11	sìp-èt	sip–ett
12	sìp –săwng	sip-song
100	nèung ráwy	nung-roy
1,000	nèung phan	nung-pan
10,000	nèung mùen	nung mwuen

To conjugate numbers like 30, 40, and so on, you simply say three-ten, four-ten, and so on. For example, 30 is *saam–sip.* Exceptions are:

- Such numbers as 11, 21, 31, and so on use the suffix *et,* not *neung,* so 11 is *sip-et.*
- Number 20 is *yee-sip* or simply *yip,* not *song-sip.*

Therefore, 21 is *yee-sip-et* or *yip-et,* not *song-sip neung,* as one might logically surmise!

INDEX

See also Accommodations and Restaurant indexes, below.

Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall (Bangkok), 128
Absolute Asia, 56
Absolute Yoga (Bangkok), 136
Academic courses, 54–55
Accommodations, 59–60. *See also* **Accommodations Index**
  best, 5–6
Adventure Divers, 161
Adventure travel, 53–54, 70–71
Air Asia, 39
Air travel
  domestic, 39
  international, 37–38
Akha (E-Kaw), 302
Alangkarn (Pattaya), 156
Alcazar (Pattaya), 161
Allied War Cemetery (Kanchanaburi), 149
Almeta (Bangkok), 137, 142
Amanpuri (Phuket), 251
Amarin Winichai Hall (Bangkok), 126
Ambassador Fashion (Bangkok), 138
American Express, 83, 381, 382
American University Alumni Language Center (Bangkok), 135
Amulet market (Bangkok), 131
Anantara (Ko Samui), 210
The Ancient City (Muang Boran), 146
Ang Khang Nature Trail, 342
Ang Thong, 212
Ang Thong Marine National Park, 184, 188, 208, 212
Anusarn Market (Chiang Mai), 321
Anusarn Night Market (Chiang Mai), 336
Ao Chalok Lam, 217
Ao Nang Beach, 264, 266
Archaeological sights and museums, best, 11–12
Architecture, 24–27
Art, 24–27
Asarnha Bucha Day, 35
Asia Books (Bangkok), 83, 138
Asia Marine (Phuket), 251
Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences (Bangkok), 141
Asia Transpacific Journeys, 56
ATMs (automated-teller machines), 42–43, 381
Ayutthaya, 149–150, 275–282
Ayutthaya Historical Study Center, 278
Ayutthaya period, 18–19, 26

Baan Celadon (Chiang Mai), 338
Baan Tohn Pheung, 338
Bai Lan, 169
Balcony (Bangkok), 144
Bamboo Bar (Bangkok), 144
Bamboo Island, 161
Ban Chiang, 373–375
Ban Chiang National Museum, 374
Bang Bao, 169
Bangkok, 72–150
  accommodations, 87–119
  active pursuits, 135
  American Express, 83
  arriving in, 72–73, 76
  banks and ATMs, 84
  bookstores, 83–84
  brief description of, 62
  business hours, 84
  cultural and wellness pursuits, 133–135
  embassies and consulates, 84
  emergencies, 84
  finding an address in, 78
  getting around, 79–83
  hospitals, 84–85
  hot lines, 85
  Internet access, 85
  layout of, 77
  lost property, 85
  luggage storage, 85
  mail and parcel services, 85
  neighborhoods in brief, 78–79
  newspapers and magazines, 85
  nightlife, 142–146
  orientation, 72–79
  pharmacies, 85
  police, 85
  post office, 86
  radio and TV, 86
  restaurants, 105–119
  safety, 86
  shopping, 137–142
  side trips from, 146–150
  sights and attractions, 120–132
  taxis, 81–82
  telephone, 86
  visitor information, 76–77
Bangkok Airways, 39
Bangkok Golf Club, 136
Bangkok Transit System (BTS), 80
Banglampoo (Bangkok), 77
  accommodations, 103–104
  restaurants, 118
Bang Pa-In, 282
Bangrak (Bangkok), 77, 79
Bangrak Wet Market (Bangkok), 141
Bang Tao Bay, 242–244, 249
Bank of America (Bangkok), 83
Ban Kwan Chang (Ban Klong Son), 172
Ban Mae Had, 219
Ban Nang Thalung Suchart Subsin (Nakhon Si Thammarat), 222
Ban Phe, 162–165
Ban Puen Palace (Phra Ram Raja Nivesana; Phetchaburi), 183

Ban Sabai (Bangkok), 145
Ban Sabai (Chiang Mai), 334
Ban Sabai (Ko Samui), 210
Ban Taling Ngam, 194
Ban Vichayen (Lopburi), 283
The Banyan Tree Spa (Bangkok), 134
The Barbican (Bangkok), 144
Barsu (Bangkok), 145
Bauhaus (Ko Samui), 211
Beaches. *See also specific beaches*
best party beaches, 8
Beatles' Bar (Ko Samui), 211
Bed Supper Club (Bangkok), 145
Beung Kaen Nakhon (Khon Kaen), 373
Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, 189
Bhumibol Dam, 293
Big Blue (Ko Tao), 209
Big Buddha (Ko Samui), 196
Big Buddha Beach (Ko Samui), 194, 200, 208
Big C (Phuket), 256
The Blue Canyon Country Club (Phuket), 252
The Blue Elephant (Bangkok), 133
Blue Stars (Ko Samui), 209, 212
Blue Water Anglers (Phuket), 252
Boat travel and cruises, 38
Ayutthaya, 276
Ayutthaya and 1-day riverboat trips, 149–150
Bangkok, 80
Ban Phe, 162–163
Chiang Mai, 332–333
Chumphon, 185
Ko Pha Ngan, 213
Ko Samui, 191–192
Krabi, 263, 264
Phuket, 251
Bookazine (Bangkok), 83
Books, recommended, 28–29
Boots (Bangkok), 138
Bophut Beach, 192, 199
Bo Phut Hills Golf Club (Ko Samui), 209
Bor Sang, 338
Bridge over the River Kwai (Kanchanaburi), 148–149
Bua Luang (Khon Kaen), 373
Bubble Disco (Chiang Mai), 339
Buddha Chinarat Festival (Phitsanulok), 286
Buddhaisawan Chapel (Bangkok), 127
Buddhist Lent, 35
Buffalo fights (Ko Samui), 197
Bugs, 45
The Bull's Head (Bangkok), 145
Bungee jumping, 333
Buranathai Buddha Casting Foundry (Phitsanulok), 287
Burapha Golf Club (Sri Racha), 160
Buriram, 378, 379
Business hours, 381
Bus travel, 38, 40
Butterfly Farm (Ko Samui), 196

Calendar of events, 36
northern Thailand, 302–303
California WOW (Bangkok), 135–136
Candle Festival (Ubon Ratchathani), 379
Canopy Adventures (Ko Samui), 197
Cape Panwa, 229
Car rentals, 39
Car travel, 39–40
Cascade Club (Bangkok), 136
Cat's Climbing Shop (Ko Phi Phi), 271
Celadon House (Bangkok), 137
Cellphones, 57–59
Central department store (Bangkok), 138
Central Festival (Phuket), 256
Central plains, brief description of, 64
Central Thailand, 275–297
CentralWorld (Bangkok), 83, 139
Cha-Am. *See also* **Hua Hin**
accommodations, 180–181
Chai's Blues Bar (Chiang Mai), 339
Chaiya, 189
Chak Phra festival (Surat Thani), 189
Chakri Dynasty, 19–20
Chakri Mahaprasad (Bangkok), 126
Chakri Memorial Day, 35
Chalong Beach, 229
Chan Kasem Palace (Ayutthaya), 278
Chanthaburi, 165–166
Chantharakasem National Museum (Ayutthaya), 278
Chao Phraya River (Bangkok), 77, 120–121
dinner cruises on the, 119
Chao Sam Phraya National Museum (Ayutthaya), 278
Charoen Krung (New) Road (Bangkok), 137
shopping, 138, 141
Chatuchak (Weekend Market; Bangkok), 142
Chaweng and Chaweng Beach, 194–196, 201–212. *See also* **Ko Samui**
accommodations, 201–204
Chaweng Noi, 194
Cheap Charlie's (Bangkok), 145
Chiang Dao, 343
Chiang Dao Cave (Wat Tham Chiang Dao), 343
Chiang Khan, 375
Chiang Mai, 309–343
accommodations, 313–321
activities, 332–335
banks and ATMs, 312
consulates, 312
cultural pursuits, 331–332
emergencies, 312
getting around, 311–312
hospitals, 313
Internet access, 313
layout of, 311
nightlife, 338–339
post office, 313
restaurants, 321–327
shopping, 335–338
side trips from, 339–343
sights and attractions, 327–332
spas, 334–335
traveling to, 309–310
visitor information, 310
Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center, 330
Chiang Mai Green Valley Country Club (Mae Rim), 334
Chiang Mai National Museum, 330
Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures, 334
Chiang Mai Sky Adventures, 334
Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School, 331
The Chiang Mai Zoo, 330–331
Chiang Rai, 357–364
Chiang Saen, 364–369

Chiang Saen Buddha (Chiang Mai), 330
Chiang Saen National Museum, 366
Chinatown (Yaowarat; Bangkok), 77, 79
accommodations, 104–109
shopping, 141
Chinese New Year, 36
Chiva-Som (Hua Hin), 182
Chiva-Som Academy (Bangkok), 134
Choeng Mon, 194
Choeng Mon Bay, 200–201
Choeng Mon Beach, 194
Christy's Cabaret (Ko Samui), 211
Chulalongkorn Day, 35
Chumphon, 184–186
Chumphon National Museum, 185
Chumphon Railway Station, 184
Citibank (Bangkok), 83
City Park Complex (Phuket), 228
City Silk (Chiang Mai), 337
Cliff jumping, Ko Phi Phi, 271
Climate, 34–35
Coco Blues Company (Ko Samui), 211
Conrad Bangkok, 145
Constitution Day, 36
Contact Travel, 332, 333
Cooking classes and schools, 54–55
Bangkok, 133–134
Chiang Mai, 331
Ko Samui, 210
Cool season, 34
Coral reefs, 45
Coronation Day, 35
Credit cards, 43
CS Leisure Travel, 185
Cuisine. *See* **Food and cuisine**
Culture of Thailand. *See also specific destinations*
art and architecture, 24–27
best experiences and activities, 1–3, 10
etiquette, 24–25
Currency and currency exchange, 41–42
Customs regulations, 37
Cynosure (Bangkok), 142

Dasa Books (Bangkok), 83
Day of Roses (Chiang Mai), 303
Dengue fever, 45
Department of Fine Arts (Bangkok), 138
The Dhevi Spa (Chiang Mai), 334
DHL Thailand, 85, 383
Diarrhea, 44
Diethelm Travel, 56, 121
Dino Park Mini Golf (Phuket), 257
Diplomat Bar (Bangkok), 145
Disabilities, travelers with, 49
Discrimination, 49
Distil (Bangkok), 144
Dive Asia (Phuket), 253
Doi Inthanon National Park, 28, 342–343, 357
Dolphin Tours, 172
Dome at State Tower (Bangkok), 144
Dragon Bar (Ko Tao), 221
Dress code, in temples and royal palaces, 25
Drinking laws, 381
Driving tips, 47
Dusit (Bangkok), 77
Dusit Maha Prasat (Bangkok), 126
Dvaravati (Mon) period, 15–16

Earth Wind and Fire (Chiang Mai), 333
Eastern & Oriental Express, 38
Eastern seaboard, 62, 151–172
Easy Divers, 208–209, 221
Ecosystems, 27
Ecotourism, 51–53
Ecotourism Training Center (ETC; Khao Lak), 258–259
EGV (Bangkok), 143
Electricity, 381
Elephant Roundup (Surin), 36
Elephants, 55
Chiang Dao, 343
Chiang Mai, 333
Pattaya, 156
safaris and treks, 172, 254, 349
Surin, 378–379
volunteering at elephant camps, 56
Elite Used Books (Bangkok), 84
Embassies and consulates, 84, 381–382
Emporium (Bangkok), 83, 139, 140
Entry requirements, 37
Eranda Herbal Spa (Ko Samui), 210
Erawan (Bangkok), 139
Erawan National Park, 149
Erawan Shrine (Bangkok), 128
Escorted tours, 56
Etiquette, 24
Evason Phuket, 255
Evason Resort and Spa (near Hua Hin), 182

Faharm (Chiang Mai), 321
Families with children, 50
The Far South, 221–223
Father's Day, 36
Federal Express (Bangkok), 85
Ferries. *See* **Boat travel and cruises**
Films, 29
Fire Boat Festival (Nakhon Phanom), 377
Fisherman's Village (Ko Samui), 192
restaurants, 207
Fishing, Phuket, 252
Fitness First (Bangkok), 136
Floating Market (Damnoen Saduak), 121
Floating Market at Damnoen Saduak (Ratchaburi), 147–148
Flora, 27–28
Flower Festival (Chiang Mai), 36, 302
Food and cuisine, 29–33. *See also* **Cooking classes and schools; Restaurants**
Food stalls, 31
Frommers.com, 44
Full Moon Party, 212
Fusion (Ko Samui), 211

Gays and lesbians, 49–50
Gem Markets (Chanthaburi), 165
Gerard Collection (Chiang Mai), 337
Giant swing (Bangkok), 132
Gibbon Rehabilitation Project (Phuket), 254–255
Ginger (Chiang Mai), 337
The Golden Buddha (Wat Traimit; Bangkok), 132
The Golden Mount (Wat Saket; Bangkok), 131–132
The Golden Triangle, 364, 367–369

Golden Triangle Tours (Chiang Rai), 361
Golf
Bangkok area, 136
Chiang Mai, 334
Hua Hin, 181–182
Ko Samui, 198, 209
Pattaya, 160
Phuket, 252
Golf A La Cart, 136
Gong Dee Gallery (Chiang Mai), 337
Good View (Chiang Mai), 339
Grand Palace
Ayutthaya, 280
Bangkok, 124, 125
Grand Pearl Cruises (Ayutthaya), 276
Green Man (Phuket), 257
Green Mango (Ko Samui), 211
Gulliver's (Bangkok), 144

Had Chao Mai National Park, 273
Had Chaophao, 216
Had Kai Be, 169
Had Kai Mook, 169
Had Klong Phrao, 169
Had Mae Had, 213
Had Rin, 212
Had Sai Khao, 169
Had Sai Ree, 219
Had Salad, 213, 217
Had Tha Nam, 169
Had Yai, 222–223
Had Yao, 213, 216
The Hall of Opium (near Chiang Saen), 367
Hariphunchai National Museum (Lamphun), 341
Harvest Festival (Kho Loi Park, Chiang Rai), 303
Health concerns, 43–46
Health insurance, 46
Healthland (Bangkok), 134
Heat exhaustion, 46
Heat rash, 46
Hellfire Pass, 149
Henry J. Bean's Bar and Grill (Pattaya), 161
Hepatitis A, 44
Heroines' Monument (Phuket), 233
Hiking and trekking, 54
Chiang Rai, 361
Doi Inthanon National Park, 342–343
northern Thailand, 305–308, 348–349
Phuket, 254
Hill-tribe Museum (Chiang Rai), 360
Hill tribes and villages, 300–308. *See also* **Northern Thailand**
crafts in Chiang Mai, 335
Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort and Spa, 255
Hin Ta (Ko Samui), 196
Hin Yai (Ko Samui), 196
History of Thailand, 13–22
Hmong (Meo), 300–301
Holidays, 35–36
Hopf Brew House (Pattaya), 161
Horseback riding, Phuket, 252
Horse racing, Bangkok, 136
Hot-air ballooning, 333
Hotels. *See* **Accommodations**
Hot Rock (Krabi), 264
Hot season, 34
The House of Dhamma (Bangkok), 135
Hua Hin, 173–184
accommodations, 177–180
activities, 181–182
getting around, 176
nightlife, 182–183
orientation, 174, 176
restaurants, 181
shopping, 182
side trips from, 183–184
sights and attractions, 177
spas, 182
traveling to, 174
visitor information, 176
Hua Lamphong Station (Bangkok), 40, 76, 152
Huntsman (Bangkok), 145
Hu'u Bar (Bangkok), 144

Il Gelato Italiano (Hua Hin), 181
Indochina Market (Nong Khai), 376
International Student Identity Card (ISIC), 51
International Training Massage (ITM; Chiang Mai), 331
International Youth Travel Card (IYTC), 51
Internet access, 59
Intrepid, 56
The Irish Xchange (Bangkok), 144
Isan, 64, 370–380
Itineraries, suggested, 64–71

Japanese encephalitis, 45
Japanese War Museum (Khun Yuam), 357
J Avenue (Bangkok), 140
Jazz festival, Hua Hin, 174
JEATH War Museum (Kanchanaburi), 149
Jet skiing, Phuket, 251
Jetstar, 228
Jewel Fest Club (Bangkok), 141
Jim Thompson's (Bangkok), 138, 142
Jim Thompson's House (Bangkok), 128
Joe Kool's (Phuket), 257
Joe Louis Theater (Bangkok), 143
John Gray Sea Canoe (Phuket), 252–253
Jolie Femme Thai Silk (Chiang Mai), 338
Jomtien Beach, 161
JP Morgan Chase (Bangkok), 83
JungCeylon (Phuket), 256
Jungle trekking, 308, 332
Just Jonno's (Ko Samui), 211

Kaeng Kut Khu, 375
Kaeng Tana National Park, 379
Kai Bae, 169
Kalare Food & Shopping Center (Chiang Mai), 339
Kanchanaburi, 148–149
Karen, 300
Karon Beach, 229
accommodations, 236–238
restaurants, 247–248
Kata Beach, 229
accommodations, 234–236
restaurants, 247–248
Kata Noi Beach, 229
Kayaking, 161, 209, 251, 252–253, 264, 270
Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTM), 38
Khao Lak, 258–260
Khao Luang Cave (Phetchaburi), 183
Khao Phra Viharn, 379
Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, 184

Khao San Road area (Bangkok)
accommodations, 103–104
nightlife, 144–145
restaurants, 111, 118
shopping, 140, 141
Khao Soi Samoe Jai (Chiang Mai), 321
Khao Sok, 189
Khao Sok National Park, 27, 188, 190, 253
Khao Takiap (near Hua Hin), 177
Khao Yai National Park, 28, 149, 371
Khlong Muang Beach, 266–267
Khlong Muang beach, 263
Khmer Empire, 16–17
Khon Kaen, 372–373
Khun Yuam, 357
King Climbers (Krabi), 264
King Mengrai Festival (Chiang Rai), 303
King Narai's Palace (Lopburi), 283
King's Cup Annual Elephant Polo Tournament (near Chiang Rai), 36
King's Cup Regatta (Phuket), 36, 251
Kinokuniya (Bangkok), 83
Kiteboarding (kitesurfing), 182, 209, 251
Klong Bangkok Noi (Bangkok), 121
Klong Bangkok Yai (Bangkok), 121
Klong Plu Waterfall, 172
Klong Saen Saep (Bangkok), 81
Ko Chang, 166–172
Ko Chueak, 273
Ko Fan Fa, 194
Ko Hang Tao, 219
Ko Hong, 263
Koh Samui Regatta, 36
Ko Khrok, 160
Ko Kradan, 273, 274
Ko Kret, 150
Ko Lan, 160
Ko Lanta, 271–273
Ko Ma, 213
Ko Mae Ko, 212
Ko Mook, 273, 274
Ko Nang Yuan, 219
Ko Ngai, 274
Ko Pha Ngan, 212–218
Ko Phi Phi, 254, 262, 268–271
Ko Phra Thong, 258
Ko Racha, 261–262
Ko Samet, 162–165
Ko Samui, 191–212
accommodations, 197–206
banks and currency exchange, 195–196
beaches, 192, 194
cultural pursuits, 210
exploring, 208–209
getting around, 195
nightlife, 211
orientation, 192
restaurants, 206–208
seasons, 191
shopping, 210
side trips from, 212
sights and attractions, 196–197
traveling to, 191–192
visitor information, 195
Ko Si Chang, 161
Ko Sok, 160
Ko Surin National Park, 258
Ko Tao (Turtle Island), 184, 185, 188, 218–221
Ko Waen, 273
Ko Wua Talab, 212
Ko Yao Noi, 260–261
Ko Yao Yai, 260–261
Krabi, 262–268
Krabi Town, 263

Laan Thai Museum (Lampang), 342
Lacquer Pavilion (Bangkok), 129
Laem Chabang International Country Club (Sri Racha), 160
Laem Chaichet, 169
Laem Sadet, 165
Laem Samrong, 200
Laem Set Bay, 194
Laem Yai, 198
Laguna Phuket Golf Club, 252
Lahu (Mussur), 301
Lai Kham Viharn (Chiang Mai), 328
Laitong Lacquerware (Chiang Mai), 338
La Luna (Chiang Mai), 335
Lamai Bay, 194, 204, 208
Lampang, 341–342
Lamphun, 340–341
Language, 382
Lanna Boat Races, 303
Lanna Golf Club (Chiang Mai), 334
Lanna kingdom, 17
Lan Sang National Park, 294, 296
Laos, 369
Lar gibbons, 254
Lava (Bangkok), 145
Layan Beach, 244
Leela Beach, 212
Lek Gallery (Bangkok), 137
Let's Relax (Chiang Mai), 334
Lido (Bangkok), 143
Lion Buddha (Chiang Mai), 328
Lisu (Lisaw), 301
Loei, 375
Loh Dalam Bay, 268
Lomprayah, 192
Lomprayah High Speed Catamarans (Ko Tao), 219
Longan Fair (Lamphun), 303
Longan Festival (Lamphun), 341
Longtails, Bangkok, 121
Lopburi, 283–284
Lord Buddha's Footprint (Ko Samui), 196
Lost and found, 382
Loy Krathong, 35, 289, 303
Lumphini Stadium (Bangkok), 134

Macaques, Lopburi, 283–284
Mae Chaem, 357
Mae Fah Luang (Bangkok), 140
Mae Hong Son, 351–356
Mae Hong Son Loop, 344–357
Mae Klang Falls, 342
Mae Kok River, 361
Mae Nam Bay, 198
Mae Nam Beach, 192
Mae Ping River Cruise Co. (Chiang Mai), 332
Mae Sai (Burma), 365
Mae Sariang, 356–357
Mae Sa Valley, 343
Mae Sot, 294, 295–296
Maetaman Elephant Camp (Chiang Mai), 333
Mae Tao clinic, 296
Magic Statue Garden (Ko Samui), 197
Mah Boon Krong (MBK; Bangkok), 139, 140
Mai Khao, 230
Mai Khao Beach, 245
Mail, 382–383
Major Cineplex (Bangkok), 143

Makha Bucha Day, 35
Malaria, 44–45
Mango Fair (Chiang Mai), 303
Mangroves, Ko Chang, 172
Manohra Cruises, 150, 276
Marble Temple (Wat Benchamabophit; Bangkok), 131
Marina Divers (Phuket), 237
Maruekatayawan Palace (between Hua Hin and Cha-Am), 177
Massage, Thai, 55, 126–127, 134
schools, 331
Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), 80
Maya Bay, 268
Medical insurance, 46
Medical requirements for entry, 37
Meditation, 55, 135, 169, 331–332
Mekong Valley Loop, 374
Meng Beach, 273
Mengrai Kilns (Chiang Mai), 337
Mien (Yao), 301
Millennium Hilton, Bangkok, 144
Mint Bar (Ko Samui), 211
Mission Hills Golf Resort & Spa (Phuket), 252
Mom Tri's Spa (Phuket), 255
Money and costs, 41–43
Mosquitoes, 45
Mother's Day, 35
Mr. Jan's Herbal Sauna and Massage (Pai), 349
Mrs. Balbir's (Bangkok), 133–134
Mr Ung's Magical Safari Tour (Ko Samui), 196, 197
Muang Boran (The Ancient City), 146
Muang Goong, 338
Mu Ko Chang Marine National Park, 169
Multi Travel and Tour (Ko Samui), 196
Mummified monks (Ko Samui), 196
Mundo Exchange Thailand, 55
Museum of Siam (Bangkok), 129
Music, 29

Naga Fireballs (Nong Khai), 36
Naga Pearl Farm (Ko Matsum), 210
Nai Harn Beach, 229, 234
Nai Soi, 354
Nai Thon Beach, 230, 244–245
Nai Yang Beach, 230, 244–245, 254
Nakhon Pathom Chedi, 147
Nakhon Phanom, 377–378
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), 371–372
Nakhon Si Thammarat, 222
Nam Phiang Din, 354
Namtok Phlio National Park, 165
Na Muang Falls (Ko Samui), 196
Nana Plaza (Bangkok), 146
Nang Yuan Resort, 221
National Australia Bank (Bangkok), 83
National Labor Day, 35
The National Museum (Bangkok), 127
The National Theater (Bangkok), 143
Natural attractions, best, 9
Natural Wing Health Spa & Resort (Ko Samui), 210
New Infinity Travel, 185
Newspapers and magazines, 383
Night markets (or bazaars)
Ayutthaya, 282
Ban Chiang, 374
Bangkok, 138
Chiang Mai, 336
Chiang Rai, 364
Hua Hin, 177, 182
Krabi, 268
Mae Hong Son, 356
Phitsanulok, 287
Nok Air, 39
Nong Khai, 376–377
Nong Nooch Tropical Garden (Pattaya), 156
North Chaweng, 194
Northern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit; Bangkok), 76
Northern Insight Meditation Center (Chiang Mai), 331–332
Northern Thailand, 64, 298–369
North Gate Jazz Co-op (Chiang Mai), 339
Nova Collection (Chiang Mai), 337

Oasis Spa (Chiang Mai), 334
Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center (Chiang Mai), 339
Old Transportation Room (Bangkok), 127
One-Two-GO, 39
Opium Museum (Chiang Saen), 367–368
OP Place (Bangkok), 137, 138
The Oriental Cooking School (Bangkok), 133
Oriental Hotel (Bangkok), 144
Oriental Spa & Ayurvedic Penthouse (Bangkok), 134
Oriental Style (Chiang Mai), 335
Outdoor Explorer (Pai), 348

Pa-bong, 338
Padaung villages, 354
Paddle Asia, 190, 253
Paddle-Asia, 253
Pai, 347–350
Pai River, 348
Pak, 273
Pak Chom, 376
Pak Klong Talad (Bangkok), 141
Pala-U waterfall, 184
Palm Hills Golf Resort and Country Club (Cha-Am), 182
Panthip Plaza (Bangkok), 139
Paradise (Phuket), 257
Paradise Park Farm (Ko Samui), 197
Paragliding, 161
Parasailing, 251
Passports, 37, 383
Pathumwan (Bangkok), 78
Patong, 238–241
restaurants, 248–249
Patong Beach, 230
Patong Medical Spa (Phuket), 255
Patpong (Bangkok), nightlife, 144, 146
Patpong Night Market (Bangkok), 138, 141
Patravadi Theater (Bangkok), 143
Pattaya, 151–161
accommodations, 156–159
currency exchange and ATMs, 154
getting around, 154
nightlife, 161
outdoor activities, 160–161
post office, 154
restaurants, 159–160
sights and attractions, 156
traveling to, 152–153
visitor information, 154

Pattaya Bay, 161
The Pattaya Elephant Village, 156
Pattaya Festival, 36
The Peak Adventure (Chiang Mai), 333–334
Phang Nga Bay, 261–262
Phang Nga Bay National Park, 252
Phanom Rung, 379
Pha Sua Waterfall, 351
Pha Taem National Park, 379
Phetchaburi, 177, 183
Phimai, 371, 372
Phi Phi Don, 268
Phi Phi Leh, 268
Phi Phi Scuba, 270
Phitsanulok, 284–288
Phra Athit Road (Bangkok), 145
Phra Maha Monthien (Bangkok), 126
Phra Mondop (Bangkok), 124
Phra Nakhon Khiri (Khao Wang; Phetchaburi), 183
Phra Nang Beach, 264
Phra Pathom Chedi (Nakhon Pathom), 147
Phra Prang Sam Yot (Lopburi), 283
Phra Ram Raja Nivesana (Ban Puen Palace; Phetchaburi), 183
Phra Sila Buddha (Chiang Mai), 328
Phra Si Rattana Chedi (Bangkok), 124
Phra Thinang Aisawan Thippa-At, 282
Phra Thinang Wehat Chamrun, 282
Phraya Nakhon Cave, 184
Phukana Wine & Music (Phuket), 257
Phuket, 224–262
accommodations, 233–246
banks and ATMs, 232
beaches, 229–230
bookstores, 232
exploring, 251–258
getting around, 230–231
hospitals, 232
Internet access, 232
layout of, 229
nightlife, 256–258
police, 232
post office, 232
restaurants, 246–250
shopping, 256
side trips from, 258–262
sights and attractions, 232–233
spas, 255
special events, 232
traveling to, 226, 228
visitor information, 228–229
Phuket Aquarium, 255
Phuket Butterfly Garden & Insect World, 255
Phuket Country Club, 252
Phuket Fantasea, 257
Phuket Laguna Riding Club, 252
Phuket Marine Biological Center, 255
Phuket Playhouse, 258
Phuket Shell Museum, 255
Phuket Town
accommodations, 246
nightlife, 257
restaurants, 250
shopping, 256
Phu Kradung National Park, 375
Phu Phrabat Historical Park, 376
Phuping Palace (Doi Suthep), 340
Phuwiang, 373
Pickpockets, 46
Pinehurst Golf & Country Club (Pathum Thani), 136
Pi Tha Khon Festival (Loei), 375
Planet Scuba (Ko Tao), 221
Ploy Scuba (Ko Chang), 172
Police, 383–384. *See also* **Tourist Police**
Political issues, 47
Pony riding, Hua Hin and Cha-Am, 177
Population and Community Development Association (PDA; Chiang Rai), 360
Post office, Pattaya, 154
Poy Sang Long, 303
Prachuap Khiri Khan, 184
Prasat Hin Phimai, 372
Prasutham Chedi, 376
Pratunam Market (Bangkok), 141
Princess Jewelry (Chiang Mai), 337
Prostitution, 48, 145–146
Pum Riang, 190
Puppet theater, Bangkok, 143
Pure Beach Lounge (Ko Tao), 221

Q
Bar
Bangkok, 145
Ko Samui, 211
Queen Sirikit Botanic Gardens, 343

R
abies, 45
Racha Islands, 261–262
Rafting, 54, 348
Railay Beach, 263–265
Rainy season, 34
Raja Ferries, 192
Rajaprarabha Dam, 190
Ramkhamhaeng National Museum (Sukhothai), 292
Ranong, 185
Rarin Jinda (Chiang Mai), 334–335
Ratchadamnoen Stadium (Bangkok), 134
Ratri Jazztaurant (Phuket), 257
Rattanakosin Island, 120
Rawai Beach, 229
Red Cross Snake Farm (Bangkok), 135
Regions in brief, 62–64
Relax Bay, 230, 238
Religion, 22–23
Resorts and spas, best, 3–5
Respiratory illness, 45–46
Restaurants. *See also* **Restaurant Index**
best, 6–8
tips on, 32–33
Restrooms, 384
Ripley's Believe It or Not (Pattaya), 156
River City (Bangkok), 121, 137, 138, 140
River Kwae (Kwai), 148
River Rovers (Phuket), 254
The Riverside (Chiang Mai), 339
River Sun Cruises, 150
Robinson's Department Store (Bangkok), 138
Rock climbing, 54
near Sankampaeng, 333
Rock-climbing, 264
Roi-Jaan, 338
Roots Reggae Club (Bangkok), 145
Rose Garden Riverside, 147
Rose Garden Tours (Mae Hong Son), 354
Royal Bangkok Sports Club (Bangkok), 136

Royal Barge Museum (Bangkok), 121, 129
Royal Chiang Mai Golf Club (near Chiang Mai), 334
Royal Hua Hin Golf Course, 182
Royal Pantheon (Bangkok), 124
Ruen-Nuad (Bangkok), 134
Rung Reung Tour, 152

Safari World & Marine Park (Minburi), 147
Safety concerns, 46–47
Sailing (yachting), 209, 251
Sairi Beach, 184, 185
Sakura Blooms Flower Fair (Doi Mae Salong), 303
Sala Kaew Ku Sculpture Park (Nong Khai), 376
Salak Kok Community Foundation, 172
Samlors, 41
Samphran Elephant Grounds and Zoo, 147
Samui. *See* **Ko Samui**
Samui Aquarium and Tiger Zoo (Ko Samui), 197
Samui Bungy (Ko Samui), 197
Samui Crocodile Farm, 197
Samui Football Golf, 209
Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts (SITCA), 210
Samui International Diving School, 208
Samui Monkey Theater, 197
Samutprakarn Crocodile Farm and Zoo (near Ancient City), 146–147
Sankampaeng Road (Chiang Mai), 337–338
Santiburi Golf (Ko Samui), 198
Sathorn (Bangkok), restaurants, 113–118
Scruffy Murphy's (Phuket), 257
Scuba Cat (Phuket), 253
Scuba diving, 53
Ko Chang, 172
Ko Nang Yuan, 221
Ko Phi Phi, 270
Ko Samui, 208–209
Ko Tao, 221
Pattaya, 161
Phuket, 253
Scuba Junction (Ko Tao), 221
Sea, Land and Trek Co. (Ao Nang), 264
Sea Bees Diving (Phuket), 253
Sea Gypsies (Chao Ley; Phuket), 233
Sea Kayak Krabi, 264
Seasons, 34–35
northern Thailand, 302
Sea Tour (Bangkok), 82
Seatran Discovery, 192
Secret Garden Pub (Ko Samui), 211
Seduction Disco (Phuket), 257
Senior travelers, 50
SF Cinema City (Bangkok), 143
SFX Cinema (Bangkok), 143
SGA Airways, 39
The Sgt. Maj. Thawee Folk Museum (Phitsanulok), 287
Shenanigan's (Pattaya), 161
Shopping, 10–11, 33
Siam cinema (Bangkok), 143
Siam Country Club (Bangla-mung), 160
Siam Ocean World (Bangkok), 139
Siam Paragon (Bangkok), 83, 139
Siam Paragon Food Court (Bangkok), 111
Siam Safari Nature Tours (Phuket), 254
Siam Silverware (Chiang Mai), 337
Siam Society (Bangkok), 129–130
Siam Square (Bangkok), 140
Siam Water Park (Minburi), 147
Si Chiang Mai, 376
Silk Bar (Bangkok), 145
Silom Complex (Bangkok), 138
Silom Galleria (Bangkok), 141
Silom Road (Bangkok)
nightlife, 144
restaurants, 109–113
shopping, 138, 141
Similan Islands, 253, 254, 258
Simon Cabaret (Phuket), 257–258
Single travelers, 51
Sirinath National Marine Park, 244, 254–255
Si Satchanalai Historical Park, 288, 289, 292–293
Six Senses Spa (Phuket), 255
Sky Bar (Bangkok), 144
Sky Smart Pass (Bangkok), 80
Smoking, 384
Snakes, 135, 197
Snorkeling, 53
Hua Hin, 182
Ko Chang, 172
Ko Phi Phi, 270
Ko Poda, 264
Ko Samui, 208–209
Phuket, 254
Sob Ruak, 365
Sofitel Centara Grand Resort and Villas (Hua Hin), 177
Soi Cowboy (Bangkok), 146
Solo Bar (Ko Samui), 211
Solo Club (Ko Samui), 211
Somphet Market (Chiang Mai), 321
Songkhla, 222
Songkran, 35
Songkran (Water) Festival, 303
Songserm boats, 185, 188, 191, 213, 219
Songtaews, 41
Pattaya, 154
Southern Bus Terminal (Bangkok), 76
Southern peninsula, 62, 64, 224–274
the east coast and islands, 173–223
Southern Thailand Botanical Garden (Trang), 273
The Spa at The Banyan Tree (Phuket), 255
Spa Ko Chang, 169
Spas
Chiang Mai, 334–335
Hua Hin, 182
Ko Chang, 169
Ko Samui, 210
Phuket, 255
Spicy (Chiang Mai), 339
Spirit Cave, 350–351
"Spiritual Theatre," 190
Springfield Royal Country Club (Cha-Am), 182
Sri-pun-krua (Chiang Mai), 338
Srivijaya Empire, 16
Standard Chartered Bank (Bangkok), 83
STA Travel, 51
Stomach trouble, 44
Student travelers, 51
Suan Lum Night Market (Bangkok), 111, 140, 141–142
Suan Mokkh, 188
Suan Mokkhabalarama (Suan Mokkh), 189

Sub Club (Ko Samui), 211
Sukhothai, 17–18
exploring, 291–292
Sukhothai (New Sukhothai), 288, 289
Sukhothai Historical Park, 288, 289, 291
Sukhothai period, 24–25
Sukhumvit Road area (Bangkok), 78, 137
accommodations, 96–103
nightlife, 145
restaurants, 113–118
shopping, 140
Sunday Walking Street (Chiang Mai), 337
Sunrise Diving (Phuket), 253
Sunsail Asia Pacific (Phuket), 251
Sunstroke, 46
Surat Thani, 186–190
Surawong Road (Bangkok)
accommodations, 92–96
restaurants, 109–113
shopping, 138
Surin, 378–380
Surin Island, 253
Sustainable tourism, 51–53
Suvarnabhumi International (Bangkok), 72–73
Suwannatee Tour, 185
Swallow nests, Phi Phi Ley, 268

Tak, 293–297
Taksin Maharachanuson Fair (Sukhothai), 294
Taksin Maharat National Park, 294, 296
Taksin Park (Chanthaburi), 165
Tamarind Springs (Ko Samui), 210
Tarutao Marine National Park (Trang), 273
Tawai, 338
Taxes and service charges, 384
Taxis, 41
Telephone Bar (Bangkok), 144
Telephones, 57
Temple of Dawn (Wat Arun; Bangkok), 131
Temple of the Great Relic (Wat Mahathat; Bangkok), 131
Temples and shrines, most fascinating, 12
Tesco Lotus (Phuket), 256
Thai Adventure Rafting (Pai), 348
Thai Airways, 39
Thai Bird Garden (Phitsanulok), 287
Thai boxing, 134–135, 211
Thai Country Club (near Bangkok), 136
Thai Elephant Conservation Center (near Lampang), 55, 333, 342
Thailand-Burma Railway Center (Kanchanaburi), 149
Thailand Cultural Center (Bangkok), 143
Thai language classes, Bangkok, 135
Thai massage, 55, 126–127, 134
schools, 331
Thalang National Museum (Phuket), 233
Tham Phra Nang, 264
Tham Pla Park, 351
Than Thip, 376
Tha Sadet (Nong Khai), 376
That Phanom, 377
Thompson, Jim, House (Bangkok), 128
Thonburi (Bangkok), 78
Thonburi's Bangkok Noi Station, 76
Thong Lor (Bangkok), 140
Thong Nai Pan, 213
Thong Nai Pan Noi, 217
Thong Nai Pan Yai, 217
Thung Si Muang Park, 379
Thung Wua Laem Beach, 184, 185
Tiffany's (Pattaya), 161
Tiger Temple (near Kanchanaburi), 149
Ti Lor Sui waterfall, 294
Timber Hut (Phuket), 257
Time for Lime Cooking School (Ko Lanta), 273
Time zone, 384
Tipping, 384
Tohn Pao, 338
Tokyu Department Store (Bangkok), 139
Tongsai Bay, 194, 200
Tonsai Bay, 268
Tourism Authority of Thailand, Bangkok, 76–77
Tourist Police
Bangkok, 84, 85
hotline, 47
Hua Hin, 176
Ko Samui, 196
Pattaya, 154
Phuket, 232
Surat Thani, 189
Traditional Medical Practitioners Association Center (Bangkok), 127
Train travel, 38, 40–41
Bangkok, 76
Chumphon, 184
Hua Hin and Cha-Am, 174
Pattaya, 152
Surat Thani, 188
Trang, 273–274
Trat, 166–172
Traveler's checks, 43
Traveling to Thailand, 37–38
Tree House (Phitsanulok), 287
Treetop Adventure Park (Bai Lan), 172
Trekking. *See* **Hiking and trekking**
Trekking Collective (Chiang Mai), 332
The Tribal Museum (Chiang Mai), 331
Tropical illnesses, 44–45
Tropical Murphy's (Ko Samui), 211
Tuk-tuks, 41

Ubon Ratchathani, 378, 379
Udon Thani, 373–375
Ultralight aircraft flights, 334
Umbrella Festival (Bo Sang), 302
Umphang, 294
Union Language School (Bangkok), 135
USIT, 51

Vegetarian Festival (Phuket), 36, 232
Viharn Phra Mongkon Bophit (Ayutthaya), 280
Vila Cini's (Chiang Mai), 335, 338
Vimanmek Teak Mansion (Bangkok), 127–128
Visa Diving (Ko Phi Phi), 270
Visakha Bucha, 303
Visakha Bucha Day, 35
Visas, 384
Visitor information, 384–385
Sukhothai, 289
Volunteer travel, 55–56

Wai (greeting), 24
Walking Street (Pattaya), 161
Wang Saotong Waterfall, 197
Wang Suan Pakkad (Bangkok), 129
Warowot Market (Chiang Mai), 337
Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn; Bangkok), 131
Wat Benchamabophit (Marble Temple; Bangkok), 131
Wat Chai Wattanaram (Ayutthaya), 280
Wat Chalong (Phuket), 233
Wat Chamadevi (Wat Kukut; Lamphun), 341
Wat Chana Songkhram (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Chang Lom (Sukhothai), 293
Wat Chedi Jet Thaew (Sukhothai), 293
Wat Chedi Luang (Chiang Mai), 327
Wat Chedi Luang (Chiang Saen), 366–367
Wat Chiang Man (Chiang Mai), 327–328
Wat Chulamanee (Phitsanulok), 287–288
Wat Doi Tong (Chiang Rai), 360
Water, drinking, 385
Wat Hin Mak Peng, 376
Wat Jed Yod (Chiang Mai), 328
Wat Jong Kham (Mae Hong Son), 354
Wat Jong Klang (Mae Hong Son), 354
Wat Kamphaeng Laeng (Phetchaburi), 183
Wat Khao Phra Yai (Pattaya), 156
Wat Khao Tham (Ko Pha Ngan), 214
Wat Khunaram (Ko Samui), 196
Wat Klang (Pai), 349
Wat Ko Keo Suttharam (Phetchaburi), 183
Wat Mae Yen (Pai), 349
Wat Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic; Bangkok), 131, 135
Wat Mung Muang (Chiang Saen), 367
Wat Na Phra Meru (Ayutthaya), 280
Wat Nongwan Muang Kao (Khon Kaen), 373
Wat Pa Sak (Chiang Saen), 366
Wat Pha Luangta Bua Yannasampanno Forest Monastery (near Kanchanaburi), 149
Wat Phan Tao (Chiang Mai), 327
Wat Phra Buat (Chiang Saen), 367
Wat Phra Kaew
Bangkok, 124
Chiang Rai, 360
Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao (Lampang), 342
Wat Phra Kaew Museum (Bangkok), 126
Wat Phra Mahathat
Ayutthaya, 280
Nakhon Si Thammarat, 222
Sukhothai, 292
Wat Phra Phai Luang (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Phra Singh
Chiang Mai, 328
Chiang Rai, 360
Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat
Lopburi, 283
Sukhothai, 293
Wat Phra Si Sanphet (Ayutthaya), 280
Wat Phra That Chom Kitti (Chiang Saen), 367
Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu (Mae Hong Son), 354
Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, 339–340
Wat Phra That Hariphunchai (Lamphun), 341
Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, 342
Wat Phra Thong (Phuket), 233
Wat Phra Yai (Ko Samui), 196
Wat Po (Bangkok), 126, 134
Wat Ratburana (Ayutthaya), 280
Wat Saket (The Golden Mount; Bangkok), 131–132
Wat Sao Thong Thong (Lopburi), 283
Wat Saphan Hin (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Sa Si (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Si Chum (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Si Khun Muang (Chiang Khan), 375
Wat Si Sawai (Sukhothai), 292
Watson's (Bangkok), 138
Wat Suan Dok (Chiang Mai), 328
Wat Suthat (Bangkok), 132
Wat Tham Chiang Dao (Chiang Dao Cave), 343
Wat Tham Sua (Krabi), 263–264
Wat Traimit (The Golden Buddha; Bangkok), 132
Wat Traphang Tong (Sukhothai), 292
Wat Yai (Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat; Phitsanulok), 288
Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon (Ayutthaya), 281
Wat Yai Suwannaram (Phetchaburi), 183
Weapons Museum (Bangkok), 126
Weather, 34–35
Websites, 58
Weekend Market (Chatuchak; Bangkok), 142
Wellness & Detox Center (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Western Tours (Hua Hin), 182–184
White Emerald Buddha (Chiang Mai), 328
Whitening (Ko Tao), 221
Wildlife viewing and attractions, 28. *See also* **Elephants**
Chiang Mai, 330
Ko Samui, 197
Lopburi, 283–284
near Bangkok, 146–147
Pai, 348
Phitsanulok, 287
Phuket, 254–255
Trang, 273
Windsurfing, 161, 251
Wit's Collection (Chiang Mai), 337
Women travelers, 50–51
World Group (Bangkok), 140
World Travel (Bangkok), 82

X Center (Chiang Mai), 333

Yao Islands, 260–261
Yaowarat (Chinatown; Bangkok), 77, 79
accommodations, 104–109
shopping, 141
Yoga, 136–137, 169
Yoga Elements Studio (Bangkok), 137

Ziplines, Ko Chang, 172

Amanpuri (Phuket), 241–242
Amari Coral Beach Resort (Phuket), 239
Amari Don Muang Airport Hotel (Bangkok), 73, 87
Amari Emerald Cove Resort (Ko Chang), 170
Amarin Lagoon Hotel (Phitsanulok), 286
Amari Orchid Resort & Tower (Pattaya), 156–157
Amari Palm Reef Resort (Ko Samui), 202
The Amari Rincome Hotel (Chiang Mai), 320
Amari Watergate (Bangkok), 98
Ananda Museum Gallery Hotel (Sukhothai), 289
Anantara Koh Samui, 199
Anantara Resort and Spa (Hua Hin), 177–178
Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle (Chiang Saen), 368
Anantara Si Kao Resort (Trang), 274
Andaman Seaview Hotel (Phuket), 236
Andatel Patong (Phuket), 241
Ao Nang Village Resort (Krabi), 266
Ao Prao Resort (Rayong), 163
Apsaras Beach Resort & Spa (Khao Lak), 259
Areca Lodge (Pattaya), 159
Ark Bar Garden Beach Resort (Ko Samui), 203
Arnoma Hotel Bangkok, 101
Arun Residence (Bangkok), 92
The Atlanta (Bangkok), 102
Away Tusita Chumphon, 186
Ayara Hilltops (Phuket), 242
Ayothaya Riverside Hotel (Ayutthaya), 281
Baan Kaew Guesthouse (Chiang Mai), 317–318
Baan Krating (Takua Pa), 260
Baan Krating Phuket Resort, 234
Baan Lotus (Ayutthaya), 281
Baan Orapin (Chiang Mai), 316
Baan San Sabay Resort (Ko Chang), 171
Baan Taling Ngam Resort and Spa (Ko Samui), 205–206
Baiyoke Chalet (Mae Hong Son), 355
Bamboo House (Kanchanaburi), 148
Bandara Resort (Ko Samui), 199
Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa, 90–91
Bann KunPra (Ayutthaya), 282
Ban Tai Beach (Ko Pha Ngan), 214
Ban Thai Guesthouse (Sukhothai), 291
The Banyan Tree (Bangkok), 93
Banyan Tree Phuket, 243
Baray Villas (Phuket), 235
Belle Villa Resort (Pai), 349
Big Bubble Dive Resort (Ko Tao), 220
Birds & Bees Resort (Pattaya), 158
Blue Wind (Ko Tao), 220
Bophut Resort and Spa (Ko Samui), 198
Bossotel Inn (Bangkok), 92
The Briza Beach Resort & Spa (Ko Samui), 201
Buddy Lodge (Bangkok), 103
Burasari Resort (Phuket), 239
Bussaracam (Khon Kaen), 373
Cape Panwa Hotel (Phuket), 246
Cathay Guest House (Had Yai), 223
Centara Grand Beach Resort (Ko Samui), 201–202
Centara Hotel (Ban Chiang), 374
Centara Hua Hin Village, 179
Centara Mae Sot Hill Resort (Mae Sot), 295
Centara Pariya Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Centara Villas Phuket, 236
The Cha-Am Methavalai Hotel, 180
Chakrabongse Villas (Bangkok), 90
Chaloklum Bay Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 217
Charlie's House (Pai), 350
Charm Churee Villa (Ko Tao), 220
Charoen Hotel (Ban Chiang), 374
Charoen Thani Princess (Khon Kaen), 373
The Chedi (Chiang Mai), 314
The Chedi Phuket, 242
Chiang Mai Orchid, 321
Chiang Mai Plaza Hotel, 316–317
Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel (Chiang Saen), 369
Chinatown Hotel (Bangkok), 105
Chiva-Som International Health Resort (Hua Hin), 178
Chomsin Hua Hin, 179
Chomsurang Hotel (Khorat), 372
Chumphon Cabana Resort and Diving Center, 186
Chumphon Gardens Hotel, 186
City Beach Resort (Hua Hin), 179
City Lodge (Bangkok), 101
CoCo Cottages (Ko Ngai), 274
Cocohut Village (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Coco Palm Samui, 198–199
Conrad Bangkok, 98
Cookies Hotel (Ko Chang), 170–171
Coral Bay Resort (Ko Samui), 202–203
Costa Lanta (Ko Lanta), 272
Diamond Cave Bungalows & Resort (Krabi), 265
The Diamond Cliff Resort & Spa (Phuket), 239
Downtown Inn (Chiang Mai), 318
Dream Bangkok, 98
Drop Inn Club Resort and Spa (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
D2 Hotel (Chiang Mai), 314, 316
Dusit Island Resort Hotel (Chiang Rai), 362
Dusit Laguna Resort (Phuket), 243
Dusit Princess Khorat, 372
Dusit Thani (Cha-Am), 180
Dusit Thani (Bangkok), 94
Dusit Thani (Pattaya), 157
Dynasty Inn Pattaya, 159
The Empress Hotel (Chiang Mai), 317
The Eugenia (Bangkok), 98–99
Eurana Boutique Hotel (Chiang Mai), 319
Evason Phuket & Six Senses Spa (Phuket), 234
Evergreen Resort (Ko Samui), 203
Felix River Kwai Resort (Kanchanaburi), 148

Fern Resort (Mae Hong Son), 354
First Hotel (Mae Sot), 295
Flipper Lodge Hotel (Pattaya), 159
The Four Seasons, Bangkok, 99
Four Seasons Chiang Mai, 313–314
Four Seasons Samui, 198
Four Seasons Tented Camp (Chiang Saen), 368
Galare Guest House (Chiang Mai), 318
Gap's House (Chiang Mai), 319–320
Golden Beach Resort (Krabi), 266
Golden Pai & Suite Resort (Mae Hong Son), 355
The Golden Triangle Inn (Chiang Rai), 363
Grand China Princess Hotel (Bangkok), 104
Grand Hyatt Erawan (Bangkok), 99
Grand President (Bangkok), 101–102
Green Papaya (Ko Pha Ngan), 217
Haad Son Resort, 216
Had Rin (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Had Sai Ree (Ko Tao), 220
Had Yao Bungalows (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Heimat Gardens Guesthouse (Ko Yao Yai), 261
Hilton Hua Hin Resort and Spa, 178
Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort & Spa, 237
Holiday Inn Phi Phi, 269
Holiday Inn Regent Beach Cha-Am, 180–181
Holiday Inn Resort Phuket, 239–240
Horizon Patong Beach Resort & Spa (Phuket), 241
Hotel De Moc (Bangkok), 103–104
Hua Hin Marriott Resort & Spa, 179
Ibiza (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Ibrik Resort (Bangkok), 92
The Imperial Boathouse (Ko Samui), 200–201
The Imperial Golden Triangle Resort (Chiang Saen), 368–369
Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son, 355
Inchantree Resort (Kanchanaburi), 148
Indigo Pearl Resort (Phuket), 245
InterContinental Hotel (Bangkok), 99–100
Jamahkiri Spa & Resort (Ko Tao), 220
J&B Hotel (Had Yai), 223
Jed Pee Nong Hotel (Hua Hin), 180
Jep's Bungalows (Ao Hin Khok), 164
J Mansion (Krabi), 266
JW Marriott (Bangkok), 100
JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa, 245
Kandaburi Resort & Spa (Ko Samui), 202
Karona Resort and Spa (Phuket), 238
Karon Beach Resort (Phuket), 236–237
Kata Country House (Phuket), 235–236
Katanoi Bay Inn (Phuket), 236
Katathani Hotel (Phuket), 234–235
KB Resort (Ko Chang), 171
KC Grande Resort (Ko Chang), 171
Kelly's Hotel (Phuket), 241
Khao Lak Banana, 260
Koh Chang Tropicana Resort & Spa (Ko Chang), 170
Koyao Bay Pavilions (Khao Lak), 261
Ko Yao Island Resort (Khao Lak), 261
K. P. Grand (Chanthaburi), 165
Krabi Resort, 266
Krabi Sands Resort, 268
Krungsri River Hotel (Ayutthaya), 281
La Flora Resort & Spa (Phang Nga), 259
Laguna Beach Resort (Phuket), 243
Lamai Wanta (Ko Samui), 205
Layana (Ko Lanta), 271
Le Bua at State Tower (Bangkok), 94
Leela Bungalows (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
The Legend Chiang Rai, 362
Le Meridien (Chiang Mai), 316
Le Meridien (Chiang Rai), 361
Le Meridien Khao Lak Beach & Spa Resort (Phang Nga), 259
Le Meridien Phuket (Phuket), 238
Le Vimarn Cottages & Spa (Rayong), 164
The Library (Ko Samui), 202
Lighthouse (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Lipa Lodge Resort (Ko Samui), 206
Lithai Guest House (Phitsanulok), 286
Little Eden Guesthouse (Soppong), 351
Lom'Lae Resort (Khao Lak), 261
Long Bay Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 217
Lopburi Inn Resort, 284
Lost Resort (Ao Phai), 164
Lotus Village (Sukhothai), 290
Luxx (Bangkok), 95
Mac Bay Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 214
Mae Hong Son Mountain Inn, 355
Mae Nam Resort (Ko Samui), 199
The Mandarin Oriental (Bangkok), 90
Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi (Chiang Mai), 314
Maneerat Resort (Si Chiang Mai), 376
Mango House (Ko Lanta), 272
Mangosteen (Phuket), 234
Mango Village (Ko Samui), 204
Marina Phuket, 237
Maritime Park & Spa (Krabi), 265
Mellow Mountain Bungalows (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Mercure Hotel Pattaya, 158–159
Merlin Beach Resort (Phuket), 240
Merlin Beach Resort and Patong Merlin, 240
The Metropole (Phuket), 246
The Metropolitan (Bangkok), 93
Milky Bay Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Millennium Hilton (Bangkok), 91
Millennium Resort Patong, Phuket, 240–241

Mom Tri's Boathouse (The Boathouse; Phuket), 235
Montien Riverside Hotel (Bangkok), 91
Montri Hotel (Chiang Mai), 320
Mooban Talay (Noi Na Bay), 164
Moonlight Bay Resort (Ko Lanta), 272
Mövenpick Resort & Spa (Phuket), 237
Muang Trat Hotel (Trat), 169
Mutmee Guesthouse (Nong Khai), 377
Napasai (Ko Samui), 198
Narai Hotel and 222 (Triple Two; Bangkok), 95
Nong Khai Grand Hotel, 377
Novotel Bangkok, 102
Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport (Bangkok), 87
100 Islands Resort & Spa, 189
Orchid Garden Guest House (Phuket), 234
Orchid Suites (Ko Samui), 205
Pailyn Hotel (Phitsanulok), 287
Pailyn Sukhothai Hotel, 290
Pai River Corner, 349
Pakmeng Resort (Trang), 274
Palm Galleria Resort (Khao Lak), 259
Panviman (Ko Chang), 170
Panviman (Ko Pha Ngan), 217–218
Paradee (Rayong), 163
Patong Merlin, 240
Pattaya Marriott Resort & Spa, 157
Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort (Ko Samui), 204
Peace Resort (Ko Samui), 199
The Peninsula, Bangkok, 90
Petchkasem Hotel (Surin), 380
Phangan Cabana Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Phi Phi Banyan Villa, 269
Phi Phi Hotel, 269
Phi Phi Island Cabana, 269
Phi Phi Island Village, 269–270
Phitsanulok Youth Hostel, 286
Phra Nang Inn (Krabi), 266
Phuket Club Med, 234
Phuket Pavilions, 244
Pimalai Resort and Spa (Ko Lanta), 272
Pirom Guesthouse (Surin), 378, 380
Piya Guest House (Mae Hong Son), 355–356
Poppies Samui Resort (Ko Samui), 203
Pullman Khon Kaen Raja Orchid (Khon Kaen), 373
Rabbit Resort (Pattaya), 157
The Racha (Ko Racha), 262
The Rachamankha (Chiang Mai), 318
Railay Bay Resort (Krabi), 265
Rayavadee (Krabi), 265
Refill Now (Bangkok), 102–103
Regency Hotel (Had Yai), 223
Remark Puzi Hut (Ko Chang), 171
Rimkok Resort Hotel (Chiang Rai), 362
Rim Pai Cottages, 350
Rin Bay View Bungalow (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
River Guest House (Chanthaburi), 165
The River House (Chiang Rai), 361–362
Riverhouse Resort (Mae Sariang), 357
Rocky's Boutique Resort (Ko Samui), 204
Royal Cliff Beach Hotel (Pattaya), 158
Royal Cliff Beach Resort (Pattaya), 157–158
Royal Cliff Grand (Pattaya), 158
Royal Cliff Terrace (Pattaya), 158
Royal Hotel (Bangkok), 104
Royal Phuket City Hotel, 246
The Royal Phuket Yacht Club, 234
Royal Princess Hotel (Chiang Mai), 317
Royal Wing (Pattaya), 158
Ruean Thai Hotel (Sukhothai), 290
Sabai Corner (Ko Yao Noi), 261
The Saboey, 200
Sai Ree Cottages (Ko Tao), 220
Salad Beach Resort (Ko Pha Ngan), 217
Sala Samui, 201
Samed Club (Rayong), 164
Samed Grand View, 164
Samed Villa's (Ao Phai), 164
Samet Ville Resort (Ao Wai), 164
The Sanctuary Resort and Spa (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Sandy Bay Bungalows (Ko Pha Ngan), 216
Santhiya Resort & Spa (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Santiburi Resort (Ko Samui), 198
Sarikantang (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
The Sarojin (Phang Nga), 259
Sawasdee Village (Phuket), 235
Sea Breeze Bungalow (Ko Pha Ngan), 215
Seven Seas Resort (Ko Kradan), 274
Shanghai Mansion (Bangkok), 104
Shangri La (Chiang Mai), 317
Shangri-La Hotel (Bangkok), 91–92
Sheraton Grande Laguna Phuket, 243–244
Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit (Bangkok), 100
Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort, 267
Sheraton Pattaya Resort, 158
Siam Beach Resort (Ko Chang), 171
Silom Convent Garden (Bangkok), 96
Sima Thani (Khorat), 372
Similana Resort (Khao Lak), 260
Sirin Hotel (Hua Hin), 179
Siri Sathorn (Bangkok), 94
Sivalai Resort (Ko Mook), 274
Six Senses Hideaway (Ko Samui), 200
Six Senses Hideaway Ko Yao, 261
Sofitel Centara Grand Resort (Hua Hin), 179
Sofitel Phokeethra Krabi, 267
Sofitel Silom Bangkok, 95
Southern Thailand Botanical Gardens (Trang), 274
The Spa, Koh Chang, 172
Spa Samui (Ko Samui), 204–205
Spa Village (Ko Samui), 205
Sri Chumphon Hotel, 186
Suansin Lanna Garden Resort (Tak), 295
Suanthip Vana Resort (near Chiang Rai), 358
Suda Guest House (Chumphon), 186
Suk 11 Guesthouse (Bangkok), 103

The Sukhothai (Bangkok), 93
Sukhothai Heritage Resort, 290
The Sun Hut (Pai), 350
Surin Beach (Phuket), 241
Swiss Lodge (Bangkok), 95–96
Swissôtel Nai Lert Park (Bangkok), 100–101
Tamarind Village (Chiang Mai), 318–319
Tapee Hotel (Surat Thani), 189
Thai Sawang (Lopburi), 284
Thapwarin Resort (Ko Ngai), 274
Tharaburi Resort (Sukhothai), 290
Thipwimarn Resort (Ko Tao), 220
Thong Tarin Hotel (Surin), 380
The Tivoli (Bangkok), 96
Tohsang City Hotel (Ubon Ratchathani), 379
Tohsang Khongjiam Resort (Ubon Ratchathani), 379
The Tongsai Bay (Ko Samui), 200
Topland Hotel and Convention Center (Phitsanulok), 286
Top North Guest House (Chiang Mai), 320
Tradewinds (Ko Samui), 203–204
Trisara (Phuket), 244–245
The Tubkaak (Krabi), 267–268
Tub Tim Resort (Ao Tubtim), 164
Twin Lotus Hotel (near Nakhon Si Thammarat), 222
Twin Palms, Phuket, 242
U Chiang Mai, 319
Umphang Hill Resort, 297
Viang Tak 2, 295
Viengtai Hotel (Bangkok), 103
The Viewkong Hotel (Nakhon Phanom), 378
Villa Duang Champa (Chiang Mai), 319
Villa Royale, 235
Wangcome Hotel (Chiang Rai), 362–363
Wang Tai Hotel (Surat Thani), 189
Wang Thong Hotel (Chiang Rai), 364
Weekender Resort and Spa (Ko Samui), 205
Westin Grande Sukhumvit (Bangkok), 101
White House Beach Resort & Spa (Ko Samui), 201
Wiang Inn (Chiang Rai), 363
Woodlands Hotel & Resort (Pattaya), 159
Woraburi Ayothaya Convention Resort (Ayutthaya), 281
Yaang Come Village (Chiang Mai), 316
Yao Yai Island Resort (Ko Yao Yai), 261
YMCA International Hotel (Chiang Mai), 321
Zeavola (Ko Phi Phi), 270

Restaurants

Amari Boulevard Hotel (Bangkok), 98
The Amazing Sandwich (Chiang Mai), 325
Ao Nang Cuisine (Krabi), 268
Aroon (Rai) Restaurant (Chiang Mai), 325
Art Café (Chiang Mai), 325–326
Art Café (Ko Samui), 207
Aye's Restaurant (Chiang Rai), 364
Baan Benjarong (Pai), 350
Baan Khanitha (Bangkok), 114
Baan Pai, 350
Baan Rim Pa (Phuket), 248
Bake and Bite (Chiang Mai), 327
Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa, 119
Ban Thai (Loei), 375
The Barbican (Bangkok), 112
Baywatch Bar (Ao Wong Deuan), 165
Bed Supper Club (Bangkok), 113
Bellini (Ko Samui), 207
Benjarong (Bangkok), 110–111
Betelnut (Ko Samui), 206–207
Big C Festival Center, 159
Big John Seafood (Ko Samui), 208
Biscotti (Bangkok), 114–115
The Blue Elephant (Bangkok), 111–112
Boathouse Regatta (Phuket), 247
The Boathouse Wine & Grill (Phuket), 247
Breakfast Hut (Phuket), 250
Breeze (Bangkok), 109
Bua Luang (Khon Kaen), 373
Cabbages & Condoms (Bangkok), 116–117
Cabbages & Condoms (Chiang Rai), 363
Cabbages & Condoms (Khorat), 372
Cabbages & Condoms (Pattaya), 160
Café Del Sol (Ko Tao), 221
Café Europa (Krabi), 268
Chanthorn Pochana (Chanthaburi), 166
Chez Andy (Khorat), 372
Choppers Bar and Grill (Ko Tao), 221
Cinnamon (Ko Chang), 169
The Cliff (Phuket), 247
Crepes & Co. (Bangkok), 117
Crust (Ko Chang), 169
Crystal Jade (Bangkok), 115
Daeng Namnuang (Nong Khai), 377
Da Maurizio (Phuket), 248
Da Vinci (Chiang Rai), 364
Didine (Khon Kaen), 373
Dirty Nelly's (Ko Tao), 221
The Dome at State Tower (Bangkok), 109–110
Dosa King (Bangkok), 117
Dream Café (Sukhothai), 291
Dr Frog's (Ko Samui), 206
Drunken Monkey (Phuket), 250
Eagle Pub (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Eat Me (Bangkok), 112
Emotion of Sushi Bamboozle (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Euro Deli (Phuket), 247
Fame (Chumphon), 186
Fern Restaurant and Bar (Mae Hong Son), 356
Frog and Gecko (Ko Samui), 207
Fujian (Chiang Mai), 322
The Gallery (Chiang Mai), 324
Good View (Chiang Mai), 324
Govinda (Bangkok), 117
Greyhound Café (Bangkok), 140
Harmonique (Bangkok), 108
Hemlock (Bangkok), 118
Hideaway Bakery (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Hong Tauw Inn (Chiang Mai), 326
The House (Chiang Mai), 322
Huen Phen (Chiang Mai), 326
Indochine (Phuket), 248
Invito (Ko Chang), 169
Irish Rover (Krabi), 268

Itsara (Hua Hin), 181
Jai Restaurant (Khao Lak), 260
Joe's Downstairs (Phuket), 248
Joe's South (Phuket), 247, 248
Joe's Steak House (Khao Lak), 260
Just Khao Soi (Chiang Mai), 324
The Kafe (Chiang Mai), 327
Kai-Mook (Mae Hong Son), 356
Ka Jok See (Phuket), 250
Kalare Food & Shopping Center (Chiang Mai), 327
Kan Eang Seafood (Phuket), 250
Karon Café (Phuket), 247
Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant (Mae Sot), 296
Kimera (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
King's Hotel (Loei), 375
Krua Canadian (Mae Sot), 296
Kuppa (Bangkok), 115
La Gritta (Chiang Mai), 326
La Gritta (Phuket), 248–249
La Matta (Ko Tao), 221
La Tasca (Mae Hong Son), 356
La Villa Pizzeria (Chiang Mai), 326
Le Banyan (Bangkok), 114
Le Bouchon (Bangkok), 112
Le Coq d'Or (Chiang Mai), 322
Le Grand Lanna (Chiang Mai), 322
L'Embuscade (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Lemongrass (Bangkok), 115
Le Normandie (Bangkok), 105
Loei Palace Hotel, 375
Los Amigos Cantina (Phuket), 250
Malakor (Ayutthaya), 282
Mango Bistro (Ko Lanta), 272
Mantra Restaurant and Bar (Pattaya), 159
Mata Hari Restaurant (Pattaya), 160
May Kaidee's (Bangkok), 118
Meekaruna Seafood (Hua Hin), 181
Mei Jiang (Bangkok), 108
Me'n'u (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Mezzaluna (Bangkok), 110
Mike's Original Burger (Chiang Mai), 327
Mom Tri's (Phuket), 247
Mrs. Balbir's (Bangkok), 115–116
Mum Aroi (Pattaya), 160
Naga Bar (Ao Phai), 165
Navrang Mahal (Krabi), 268
New Heaven (Ko Tao), 221
New York Steakhouse (Bangkok), 113
Nikita's Café Bar (Phuket), 250
Nira's Bakery (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Noori India (Ko Samui), 207
Oasis on the Sea (Phuket), 247
Old Dutch (Chiang Rai), 363–364
Om Ganesh (Ko Pha Ngan), 218
Orchid (Phuket), 248
Paddy's Palms (Ko Chang), 169
Pae Fa Thai Floating Restaurant (Phitsanulok), 287
Pae Krung Kao/The Floating Restaurant (Ayutthaya), 282
Pan Yaah (Phuket), 249
PaPa (Chumphon), 186
Papa's Tapas (Ko Tao), 221
Patong Seafood Restaurant (Phuket), 249
Patravadi Theatre (Bangkok), 118–119
Pier 59 (Bangkok), 113–114
The Pier (Ko Samui), 207–208
Poppies (Ko Samui), 206
Pulcinella Da Stefano (Chiang Mai), 324–325
Pyramid Bar & Restaurant (Khao Lak), 261
Quo Vadis (Ko Samui), 208
Rabiang Patchani (Ban Chiang), 374–375
Ratana's Kitchen (Chiang Mai), 326
Ratri Jazztaurant (Phuket), 247–248
Rattanakosin (Chiang Rai), 364
Red Snapper (Ko Lanta), 272
Red Snapper (Ko Samui), 206
The Riverside (Chiang Mai), 325
On the Rock (Phuket), 247
Rockfish (Phuket), 249
Ruen Tamarind (Chiang Mai), 325
Sabai-Sabai (Phuket), 248
Sala Rim Nam (Bangkok), 119
Salvatore (Phuket), 250
Sassi (Ko Chang), 169
Scruffy Murphy's (Phuket), 248
Seafood Market (Bangkok), 116
Shangri-La Hotel (Bangkok), 119
Shin Daikoku (Bangkok), 114
Shintaro (Bangkok), 116
Siam Indigo (Phuket), 250
Silver Sand Resort (Ao Phai), 165
Sirocco (Bangkok), 110
Somboon Seafood (Bangkok), 112
Sony Yadaw (Chanthaburi), 166
Spa (Ko Chang), 169
The Spa Restaurant (Ko Samui), 208
Starfish and Coffee (Ko Samui), 207
Studio 9 & Patravadi Theatre Café (Bangkok), 108–109
Taling Pling (Bangkok), 113
Tatonka (Phuket), 249
Thiptara (Bangkok), 108
Ton Pho (Bangkok), 118
Udomros (Nong Khai), 377
Vecchia Napoli (Ko Samui), 207
Vientiane Kitchen (Bangkok), 117–118
Watermark Bar Restaurant (Phuket), 250
The Whole Earth (Chiang Mai), 324
Will Wait (Ko Samui), 206
Yok Yor Klongsan and Yok Yor Marina (Bangkok), 109
Zen (Phuket), 248
Zico's (Ko Samui), 207

Frommer's®
Thailand

My Thailand

by Ron Emmons

GAZING FROM MY WINDOW AT THE OUTLINE OF DOI SUTHEP, the mountain that stands guard over Chiang Mai, I feel so lucky that I actually live in Thailand. So much makes it worthwhile: a leisurely bike ride beside the Ping River, a turquoise sea churning with tropical fish, or just the surprise of an unexpected encounter with a giant hornbill one misty morning in Khao Yai National Park.

Chiang Mai, my adopted home, has one of the greatest concentrations of temples in the country, and the low, sweeping roofs of Lanna temples evoke a placid timelessness. While drifting in a hot-air balloon over endless rice paddies one dawn, I was reminded that rural Thailand is just as seductive as its bustling cities and tranquil beaches. Bangkok, the country's capital, pulses with designer malls overshadowing glittering temples, open-air bars teetering on top of 60-story skyscrapers, and superstar chef-cooked menus at New York prices. Yet this is a city where you can also find a delicious bowl of seafood noodles for just a dollar, or get a rejuvenating foot massage for ten bucks. Outside the capital, the serene, stone-hewn Buddhas of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, jungle trails through lushly-forested national parks, and palm-fringed beaches of the islands are all compelling attractions.

As I discovered many years ago, Thailand's captivating charm lures patient explorers back, again and again, and—as in my case—some of us never leave. The photos here capture some of my favorite Thailand images and experiences—I'm sure you'll have many more of your own.

© Bruno Morandi/AGE Fotostock

© Hugh Sitton/Getty Images

The Thais have a most amazing attentiveness to detail, best demonstrated in their superb jewelry, embroidery, and carving. Give a Thai chef a carrot, and out of it he will create a fire-breathing dragon. Ask Thais to embellish a temple, and artisans will take millions of broken crockery shards and build a twinkling mural, adorned by celestial dancers, as at Bangkok's **WAT ARUN (left).** I haven't got the patience to knit a sock.

I am constantly drawn to the wondrously varied temple styles found throughout Thailand. The stupas, or dome-shaped shrines, such as those at **LAMPHUN (above)** borrow from the bell-shaped temples of Sri Lanka. A few are gilded but most are simply whitewashed. Ziggurat-shaped temples reflect Isaan's Khmer connections, and gorgeous maroon and white frescoes adorn the low-built temples of the Lanna period around Chiang Mai.

First page: top, © Yoshio Tomii/SuperStock; bottom, © Christophe Boisvieux/Corbis

© Angelo Cavalli/Zefa/Corbis

© Reinhard Dirscherl/Alamy

The Southern Thais are a laid-back lot with a zest for explosive cuisine and a lazy life, and who can blame them? A trip to the **SIMILAN ISLANDS (left)** or Krabi is enough for me to start spouting about imminent retirement. These days there are few beach shacks going for a dollar but plenty of upscale sybaritic hideaways, pristine dive sites, and tropical fish to keep beach bums like me happy.

Southern Thailand's unique geomorphology has generated some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. Great rust-colored cliffs rise suddenly from turquoise waters over which sea eagles circle. Doughnut-shaped limestone formations, called ***HONGS* (above)** in Thai, can be entered by **LONGTAILS (above)** or small boat; they offer complete privacy, secluded white sand beaches, or hidden caves.

© Sangdao Sattralepa/Corbis

The full moon in November brings to life the **LOY KRATHONG FESTIVAL (above)** a highly revered Buddhist celebration. It's most spectacular in Chiang Mai, where giant 2-meter-tall paper lanterns float across the sky like a galaxy of moving stars. Fantastic!

Inside Thailand's numerous national parks, few visitors know it is possible to spot a clouded leopard or lar gibbon as it makes a rare jungle appearance. If you're accompanied by a good naturalist, or just have keen eyes, delights such as a fleeting **HORNBILL (right),** sea eagle or the shy sambar deer may add intense excitement to your holiday.

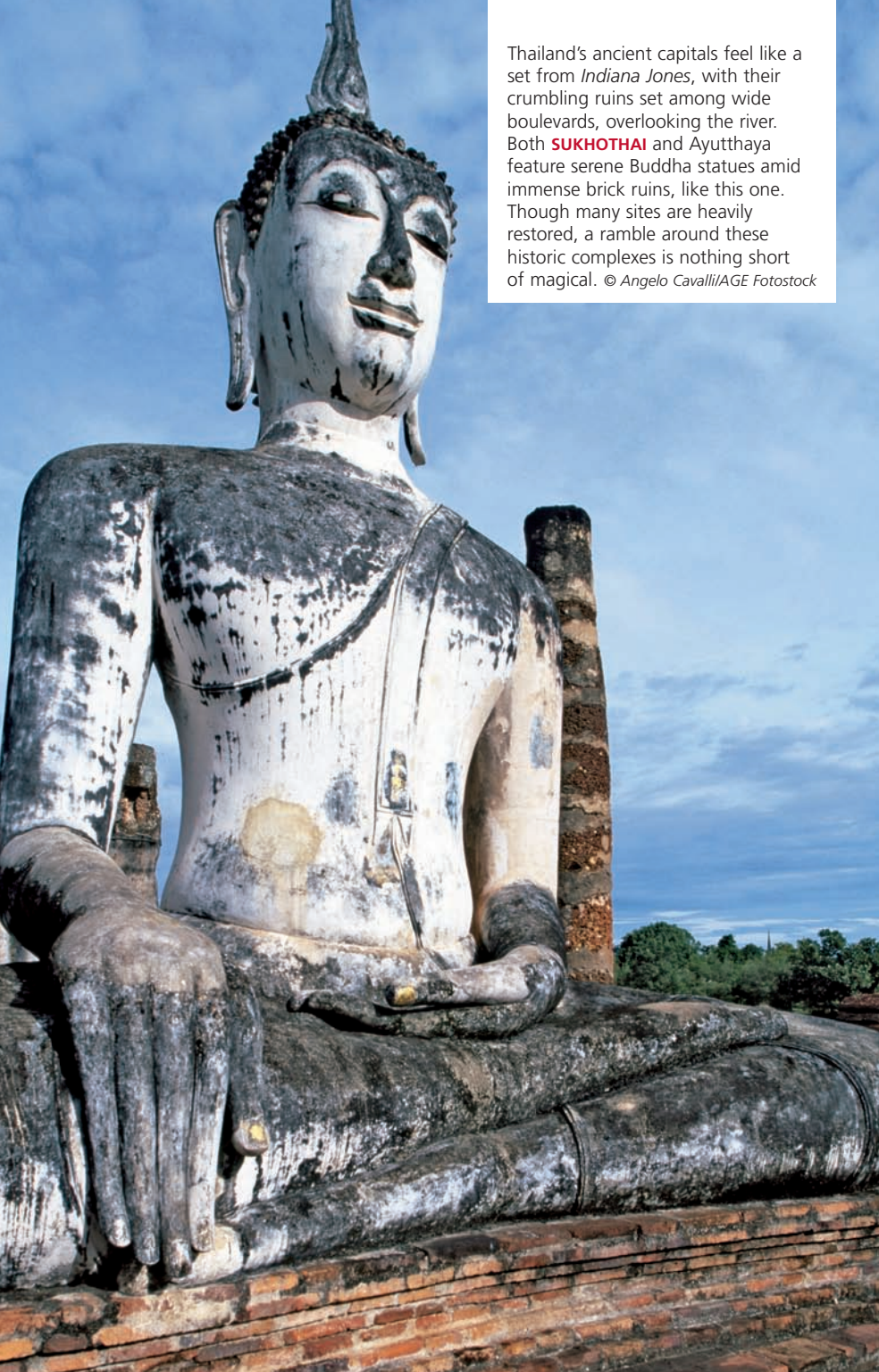
© Tim Laman/National Geographic/Getty Images

I love to head down to the east bank of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok and stare over to **WAT ARUN (right, and on p. 2)** which sits on the west bank, as the sun sets behind the temple's tall prang (spire). The silhouette of the spire provides an inimitable background for the constant bustle of longtail boats, tugboats, river taxis, ferries and tourist cruise boats. Utterly hypnotic.

Whether you're visiting a fruit market, a silk shop, or a temple, you'll see that Thailand is a riot of color. Multicolored plaster gods, or demons, painted in a variety of hues stand sentry in front of dazzling prayer halls, like this one in **CHIANG MAI (below).**

© Simon Reddy/Alamy

© Terry Whittaker/Alamy



Thailand's ancient capitals feel like a set from *Indiana Jones*, with their crumbling ruins set among wide boulevards, overlooking the river. Both **SUKHOTHAI** and Ayutthaya feature serene Buddha statues amid immense brick ruins, like this one. Though many sites are heavily restored, a ramble around these historic complexes is nothing short of magical. © *Angelo Cavalli/AGE Fotostock*

Chiang Saen
Chiang Rai
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
Chiang Khong
Fang
0 100 miles
0 100 kilometers
Pai
Mae Hong Son
NORTHERN HILLS
Chiang Mai
Nan
Yom
Lamphun
Lampang
Phrae
Mae Sariang
Wang
LAOS
VIETNAM
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Uttaradit
Loei
Ban Chiang
Si Satchanalai
Sukhothai
Udon Thani
Nakhon Phanom
Tak
Mae Sot
Phitsanulok
Chi
Khon Kaen
Phetchabun
MYANMAR (BURMA)
Kamphaeng Phet
ISAN
Ping
Nakhon Sawan
Phimai
Ubon Ratchathani
CENTRAL PLAINS
Mun
Khwae Noi
Noi
Nam
Lopburi
Chao Phraya
Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)
Surin
Ayutthaya
Nam Tok
Kanchanaburi
Sam Rong
Nakhom Pathom
Bangkok
Chon Buri
CAMBODIA
Andaman Sea
Phetchaburi
Cha-Am
Bangsaen
Hua Hin
Pattaya
Tonle Sap
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Rayong
Chanthaburi
CHANTHABURI PROVINCE
Ko Samet
EASTERN SEABOARD
Ko Chang
Trat
Chumphon
Ko Tao
Ko Mak
Phnom Penh
Ko Phangngan
Ko Kut
Ranong
Ko Samui
Ko Surin
Surin National Marine Park
Khanom
Gulf of Thailand (Gulf of Siam)
N
VIETNAM
Surat Thani
Phangnga
SOUTHERN PENINSULA
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Phuket
Krabi
Ko Phi Phi
THAILAND
Songkhla
Andaman Sea
Had Yai
Pattani
Ko Tarutao
Tarutao National Park
MALAYSIA
Narathiwat

Experience the lush jungles of Chiang Mai from the back of an elephant. See chapter 12.

Detailed maps throughout

•

Exact prices, directions, opening hours, and other **practical information**

•

Candid reviews of hotels and restaurants, plus sights, shopping, and nightlife

•

Itineraries, walking tours, and **trip-planning ideas**

•

Insider tips from local expert authors

Find travel news & deals, expert advice, and connect with fellow travelers at

Frommers.com

$22.99 USA/$27.99 CAN/£16.99 UK

ISBN 978-0-470-53766-4

52299

9 780470 537664

A Frommer's® Book
A Branded Imprint of
WILEY

9th Edition